OLIVER OCTOBER

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OLIVER OCTOBER

BY
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“BEVERLY OF GRAUSTARK,” “SHERRY,”
“VIOLA GWYN,” ETC.

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Oliver October

CHAPTER I

OLIVER IS BORN IN OCTOBER

Oliver Baxter, junior, was born on a vile October day in 1890—at seven o'clock in the morning, to be exact. People were more concerned over the plight of a band of gypsies, camped on the edge of the swamp below the Baxter house, however, than they were over the birth of Oliver, although he was a very important child.

The gypsies, journeying southward, had been overtaken by an unexampled and unseasonable blizzard, and citizens of Rumley, in whom curiosity rather than pity had been excited by the misfortunes of the shivering nomads, neglected for the moment that civic pride which heretofore had never failed to respond to any increase in population as provided solely by nature.

First off, Rumley was a very small place at the beginning of the 'nineties. A birth or a death was a matter of profound importance. In the case of the former, all Rumley knew about it months before it happened, and rejoiced. A form of anticipatory interest, amounting almost to impatience, centered upon any expectant mother who ultimately was to add another inhabitant to the town. It was absolutely impossible for a baby to be born in Rumley without the whole town knowing about it within the hour. For that matter, it was equally impossible for any one to die with any degree of privacy unless he went about it deliberately as did Bob Cheever who stole off into the woods back in '81 and hung himself so cunningly that twenty-four hours passed before his body was discovered.

But, on the whole, the births were what counted most, for, with a true philosophy, the people of Rumley, anticipating that every one had to die some time or other, depended on nature to do its part toward repairing all losses in population by producing a brand-new citizen for every old one who happened to drop put. With a scant five hundred inhabitants, Rumley could ill afford to have its birth rate surpassed by its death rate. The year in which Oliver Baxter, junior, was born had been a lean one; there had been thirteen deaths up to October and only seven births. The surprising mortality was

due to the surrender of five old men and three old women who had hung on well beyond the age of ninety, and then, with unbecoming perversity, had combined upon an unusually barren year in which to die.

In view of the fact that no one else could possibly be born in 1890, now that October was at hand, it would seem that Oliver was entitled to a great deal more consideration than he received on his natal day. But when one considers the simultaneous arrival of a blizzard and a band of wandering gypsies at a time of the year when neither was expected, and offers in opposition the arrival of an infant that had been expected ever since the preceding February, it is only fair to say that there were extenuating circumstances and that Rumley was not entirely to blame for its default in civic pride.

Oliver's parents were prominent in the commercial, social and spiritual life of the town. His father was the proprietor of the hardware store, a prominent member of the Presbyterian church, and a leader in the local lodge of Odd Fellows. He was well on to forty-five when his namesake, was born, and as this son and heir was the first and only child born to the Baxters it is easy to understand the interest and concern that accompanied his approach and arrival into the world—that is to say, up to the distracting intervention of the October cold snap which came apparently out of nowhere and confounded everybody.

Baxter was a hard-cased bachelor of forty when he succumbed to the charms of Mary Floyd, the daughter of the toll-gate keeper at the edge of the village, and asked her to marry him. A full three years elapsed, however, before they could be married. This was due to Mary's stubborn and somewhat questionable fidelity; her ancient father, it appears, was irascibly certain that he could not manage the affairs of the toll-gate without her assistance: how was he to keep house for himself, or get his own meals, or do his own washing and ironing, or take care of the cow and the pigs? In fact, he was the sort of man who did not believe in trying to do anything for himself as long as there were able-bodied women about the place to do it for him. For twenty years Mary had been his right-hand woman, beginning at the tender age of ten, within fifteen or twenty minutes after the death of her mother, who, by the way, had taken care of Martin for a matter of twenty-five years without rest or recompense. Two older brothers had exercised the masculine prerogative and, having families of their own, left Mary to wither, so to speak, "on the parent stem."

Old Martin died when Mary was thirty-two. Instead of observing the customary year of mourning, she married Oliver inside of three months after

the joyous bereavement, much to the surprise and passing grief of her neighbors, who were unable, for the life of them, to understand how she could do such a thing when her father was hardly cold in the grave. Joseph Sikes, who ran a feed store in connection with and back of Baxter's hardware establishment, and was a Godless man, set a good many people straight by sardonically observing that anybody as mean as Martin Floyd never would be cold in his grave, owing to the heat that was getting at him from below.

Now as for Oliver Baxter, the elder. He was a scrawny man with a drooping sandy mustache and a thatch of straw-colored hair that always appeared to be in need of trimming no matter how recently it had been cut by Ves Bridges, the barber. In the matter of stature he was a trifle above medium height on Sundays only, due to a studied regard for the dignity that accrued to him as deacon in the church and passer of the collection box at both services. Moreover, he wore a pair of Sabbath day shoes that were not run down at the heel. On week days, in his well-worn business suit and his comfortable old shoes, he was what you would call a trifle under medium height. He was a shy, exceedingly bashful sort of man, with a fiery complexion that cooled off only when he was asleep, and he was given to laughing nervously—and kindly—at any and all times, frequently with results that called for a confused apology on his part and sometimes led to painful misunderstandings—for example, the time he made tender and sympathetic inquiry concerning the health of young Mrs. Hoxie's mother and cackled cheerfully when informed that the old lady was not expected to last the day out, she was that bad.

How he ever screwed up the courage to propose to Mary Floyd was always a mystery to the entire population of Rumley, including Mary herself, who in accepting him was obliged to overlook the two perfectly inane spasms of laughter with which his bewildered plea was punctuated. She took him, nevertheless, for she was a prudent spinster and had got to the age where people not only were beginning to pity her but were talking of putting her in charge of the public library as soon as old Miss Lowtower died.

Mary at thirty-two was a comely, capable young woman, fairly well educated in spite of Martin Floyd's exactions, and was beloved by all. If it had not been for the fact that Oliver Baxter was prosperous, honest and a credit to the town, people no doubt would have said she was throwing herself away on him, for it must be said that the Floyds, despite their reduced circumstances, were of better stock than the Baxters. Martin Floyd,

in his younger days, had been a schoolmaster and had studied for the law. Moreover, he had been thrice elected justice of the peace and during Grant's last administration was postmaster at Rumley. Whereas, Oliver Baxter's father had been a farmhand and Oliver himself an itinerant tin-peddler before really getting on his feet. But as the fortunes of the Floyds went down those of the frugal and enterprising Baxter came up, so, on the whole, Mary was not making a bad bargain when she got married—indeed, she was making a very good bargain if one pauses to consider the somewhat astonishing fact that she really loved the homely and unromantic little bachelor.

When, after two years, it became known that on or about the twentieth of October Mary Baxter was going to have a baby, the town of Rumley and the country for miles about experienced a thrill of interest that continued without abatement up to the very eve of the new Oliver's natal day, when, as before mentioned, it was stifled by a sudden change in the weather and the belated descent of the gypsies.

It must not be assumed that the gypsies were welcome. Far from it, they were most unwelcome. Their appearance on the outskirts of Rumley was the occasion of dire apprehensions and considerable uneasiness. The word gypsy was synonymous with thievery, kidnaping, black magic and devilry. More than one instance of curses being put upon respectable people by these swarthy, black-eyed vagabonds could be mentioned, and no one felt secure after foolishly subjecting herself to the dire influence of the fortune-telling females of the tribe. Little children were kept indoors, stables and cellars were locked, and backyards zealously watched during the time the gypsies were in the neighborhood.

Small wonder then that the young and tender Oliver failed to hold his own against such overwhelming odds. Nearly twenty-four hours elapsed before the town as a whole took notice of him. By nightfall it was pretty generally known that he was a boy and that his name, provisionally selected, was to be Oliver and not Olivet, as it might have been had his sex been what everybody prophesied it was bound to be. Mr. and Mrs. Baxter, in the second year of their married life, had gone to a nearby city to see a performance of the comic opera "Olivet," and were so delighted with it—especially the song "In the North Sea Lived a Whale"—that they decided then and there if a girl should ever be born to them they would call her Olivet, that being as near to Oliver as they could possibly come.

They yearned for an Oliver, of course, but in the event he did not materialize, it would be a rather satisfactory compromise to substitute a "t"

for the “r” which they would have preferred.

So they called him Oliver and added October to that, as a tribute to the month in which he was born.

The Baxter residence, a two-story frame building, stood at the top of a tree-covered knoll on the edge of the town, overlooking an extensive swamp in the center of which lay a reed-encircled pond where at certain seasons of the year migratory wild ducks and geese disported themselves in perfect security, for so treacherous was the vast morass guarding this little body of water that even the most daring and foolhardy of hunters feared to cross it. These evil acres bore the name of Death Swamp. They belonged to Oliver Baxter. He bought the whole tract, four hundred acres or more, for twenty-five dollars, and with a droll sense of humor described it as his back yard.

The wild October gale had been blowing all day long, a bleak legacy of the blizzard that swept over the land during the night. There were high, white drifts in sheltered nooks and corners; a fine, sleety snow cut mercilessly through the air, beating against window panes like sweeps of bird shot, scuttling through reluctantly opened doors, swirling in restless fury across porches, all to the tune of a shrill wind that came whistling out of the north. In an upstairs corner room, warmed by a big, carefully tended sheet-iron stove, young Oliver first saw the light of day. No finer “young-un” had ever been born, according to Mrs. Serepta Grimes, and Serepta was an authority on babies. It was she who took command of Oliver, his mother and his father, the house itself, and all that therein was. She was there hours ahead of Dr. Robinson, and she was still there hours after his departure. Throughout the town of Rumley, Serepta was known as a “blessing and a comfort.” Her word was law. Fond mothers and frightened fathers submitted to her gentle but arbitrary regulations without a murmur of protest. Joe Sikes claimed—and no one disputed him—that you couldn’t come into or go out of the world properly without being assisted by Serepta Grimes. She was that kind of a woman.

She saw to it that all the cracks around the window frames were securely stuffed with paper to keep the wind from coming in; she kept Oliver’s beaddled father from darting into the room every time he heard the baby cry; she gave peremptory directions to neighbor-women who came in to see what they could do; she kept the fire going, the kitchen running, and, by virtue of her own vast experience and authority, she kept the doctor in his place. Perhaps a hundred times during the day she had patiently answered “Yes” to the senior Oliver’s tremulous question: “Is she going to pull through, Serepty?”

In this cozy little room and in the presence of the doctor and Serepta Grimes, young Oliver was weighed by his father. For this purpose, a brand-new, perfectly balanced meat-scales, selected from stock, was brought up from the hardware store by Mr. Sikes, who, while being denied the privilege of witnessing the ceremony, subsequently was able to collect fifty cents from another bosom friend of the family, Mr. Silas Link, undertaker and upholsterer. The infant weighed nine and a quarter pounds, Joseph winning his wager by a scant quarter of a pound. The two worthies also had made another bet as to the sex of the infant, Mr. Sikes giving odds of two to one that it would be a boy. Up to seven o'clock in the evening, fully twelve hours after the baby was born, neither Mr. Sikes nor Mr. Link had the slightest idea who had won the bet, for, try as they would, there seemed to be absolutely no way of getting any authentic information from upstairs, owing to the speechless condition of Oliver senior and the drastic reticence of Serepta Grimes.

And so, as the story of Oliver October really begins at seven o'clock in the evening, regardless of all that may have transpired in the preceding twelve hours of his life, we will open the narrative with Mr. Joseph Sikes hovering in solitary gloom over the base-burner in the sitting-room to the right of the small vestibule hall whose door opened upon the snow-covered, wind-swept front porch. For the better part of an hour he had been sitting there, listening with tense, apprehensive ears to the brisk footsteps in the room overhead. The sitting-room was cold, for Joseph had neglected to close the front door tightly on entering the house and the wind had blown it ajar, permitting quite an accumulation of snow to carpet the hall. He had purposely left the sitting-room door open in order to hear the better what was going on at the top of the stairs. His attention was called to this almost criminal act some fifteen or twenty minutes after its commission by the sound of a man's voice in the upper hall. It was an agitated voice and it was raised considerably in the effort to make itself heard by some one on the other side of a closed, intervening door.

"Say, Serepty, I—I think the front door is open," the voice was saying. Joseph wasn't sure, but he thought it belonged to Oliver Baxter. At any rate, the speaker was in the upper hall. After a moment it continued. "Like as not Mary and the baby will ketch cold and die if—"

A door squeaked upstairs and then came the voice of Serepta Grimes.

"My goodness! Of course, it's open. Haven't you got sense enough to go down and shut it? Who left it open anyway? You?"

“I thought I heard somebody come in a little while ago. Must have been __”

“Go down and shut it this instant. And stay downstairs, you goose.”

The door closed sharply and Mr. Sikes, recovering from a temporary paralysis, clumsily got to his feet and hurried into the hall.

“Never mind, Ollie,” he whispered hoarsely to the figure descending the stairs. “I’ll shut it. Some darned fool must have forgot to close it.”

“Isn’t that snow on the floor?” demanded Mr. Baxter, pausing midway on the stairs. The light from the sitting-room door fell upon his pinched, worried face as he peered, blinking, over the banister.

“Must have blowed in,” mumbled Joseph guiltily. “You don’t suppose she’s taken cold, do you, Ollie?”

“She probably has,” groaned Mr. Baxter. “She’s—she’s dying anyhow, Joe—she hasn’t got more than half an hour to live. I—”

“Is the doctor up there?”

“No. He ain’t been here since five o’clock. Oh, the poor—”

“I guess she’s all right or he wouldn’t have gone off and left her,” said Mr. Sikes consolingly. “I guess it wouldn’t be a bad idea to sweep all this snow out. Where’ll I find a broom?”

“In the kitchen—in the kitchen, Joe. My God, what have I ever done that we should have a blizzard like this on the one day that—”

“Come on down, Ollie, and let me give you a swig at this bottle I brought along with me. I can hear your teeth chatterin’ from here.”

“I haven’t got any shoes on,” protested Mr. Baxter. “I’m trying not to make any more noise than I can help. Besides I don’t want Mary to smell liquor on me. No, I can’t come down. I’d never forgive myself if she was to die and me not up here where I could hear her calling for me. Yes, sir—she’s not going to pull through, Joe—she’s not going to get well. I—”

“What does Serepty say?”

“Serepty? Oh, she says she’s all right and as fit as a fiddle—but I know better. She’s just saying that to brace me up. She—”

The door squeaked above him and Mrs. Grimes spoke.

“Didn’t I tell you to close that door, Oliver Baxter? Who is that you’re talking to?”

“Don’t tell her,” whispered Mr. Sikes, springing nimbly to the door. “She don’t like me anyhow, and—Oh, the danged thing’s stuck! I’ll have to get the broom.”

Mr. Sikes hurried to the kitchen and returned with the broom. Baxter was still standing on the stairs, in a listening attitude.

“Sh!” he hissed. “Don’t do that? I thought I heard—” He turned and darted up the stairs, leaving Mr. Sikes to his task. Presently he came half way down again and addressed the sweeper, who had just completed his job and was closing the door against the pressing wind. “I’m up here in the spare bedroom, Joe, if you need me for anything. I’ve just been thinking that the house might catch fire with all these stoves going and the wind blowing so hard. If you smell anything burning come up and let me know.”

“Just a second, Ollie,” whispered Joseph, from the bottom of the steps. “Is it a boy or a girl?”

But Oliver failed to answer. He had disappeared, tiptoeing in his stocking feet past the closed and guarded door at the bend in the hall.

His friend went back to his place by the base-burner and sat down. In skirting the table in the center of the room he paused long enough to take a cigar from the box of “Old Jim Crows” that Oliver had purchased for distribution among congratulatory friends. He hesitated a long time before lighting it, however. He knew from past experience that Serepta Grimes objected to men smoking in the house, and, while this was not her house, nevertheless for the time being she was complete mistress of it.

To look at Joseph Sikes you would never believe that he could be afraid of anything or anybody. He was a burly, rugged, middle-aged man with broad shoulders, a battling face and a thick shock of black hair that might well have supplied you with a corporeal picture of what Samson must have looked like before he was shorn. He looked somewhat ill at ease and uncomfortable in his Sunday suit of clothes and his starched shirt and the bothersome collar that appeared to be giving him a great deal of trouble, judging by the frequency with which he ran his forefinger around the inside of it and twisted his puckered, uplifted chin from time to time as if in dire need of help. Mr. Sikes was an unmarried man. He was not used to tight collars.

The combination sitting-and dining-room was on the side of the house facing the main thoroughfare of the town. Its windows looked out across the porch and down the wooded slope to the street, a hundred yards away. Mr. Sikes on his arrival after a scant supper at his boarding-house in Shiveley's Lane had found the entire lower part of the house in darkness except the kitchen. He took it upon himself to light the two kerosene lamps in the sitting-room and subsequently—in some dismay—to draw down the window shades. He replenished the fire from a scuttle of coal and then, on second thought, went down into the cellar and replenished the scuttle. After performing these small chores, he removed his overcoat and hat and hung them over the back of a chair alongside the stove. He forgot to remove his goloshes, and it was not until he became aware of the smell of scorching rubber that he remembered where he had put them on sitting down for the second time in front of the stove. He had put them on the bright nickel-plated railing at the bottom of the base-burner with only one thought in mind: to get his feet warm.

He was aghast. That odor of calamity was bound to ransack the house from bottom to top, with desolating consequences. Mary would think the house was afire, Oliver would lose his head completely, Serepta would—and the child? It didn't take much to suffocate a baby. Mr. Sikes was not long in deciding what to do. He opened a window, jerked off the offending goloshes, and hurled them far out into the snowdrifts.

It was while he was in the act of disposing of the damning evidence that he heard the kitchen door slam with a bang. Somewhere back in his mind lurked an impression that some one had been knocking at the front door during the tail end of his profound cogitation. He had a faint, dim recollection of muttering something like this to himself:

"You can knock your fool head off, far as I'm concerned."

The slamming of the kitchen door irritated Mr. Sikes. His brow grew dark. This was no time to be slamming doors. He strode over to investigate. If the offender should happen to be Maggie Smith, Baxter's hired girl, she'd hear from him. What business had she to be away from the house for more than an hour, just at supper time, and probably catching cold or—

CHAPTER II

HIS RELATIVES AND HIS NEIGHBORS

He opened the door and was confronted by a pair of total strangers—a man and a woman, bundled up to the ears and tracking snow all over the kitchen floor. A tall man with short black whiskers and a frail little woman with red, wind-smitten cheeks and a nose from which depended a globular bit of moisture.

Mr. Sikes stared at the couple and they stared at him.

"I've been knocking at the front door for ten minutes," said the man, thickly.

"So we finally had to come to the kitchen door," added the woman, eyeing Mr. Sikes accusingly.

"Isn't there anybody here to answer the front door?" demanded her companion.

"I don't seem to recollect locking it," said Mr. Sikes, stiffening perceptibly. He did not like the tone or the manner of these strangers. "There wasn't anything to stop you from turning the knob, was there, and walkin' right in—same as you did out here?"

"We are not in the habit of walking into people's houses like that," said the black-whiskered man, somewhat tartly. "Come on, Ida; let's go into the sitting-room."

"Just a second," interposed Mr. Sikes. "I'm sort of in charge here and I guess I'll have to ask who you are."

"I am Oliver Baxter's sister," said the red-nosed woman, "and this is my husband, Mr. Gooch. We drove all the way over here to take charge of things for my brother during his—"

"Seems to me I smell rubber burning," broke in Mr. Gooch, sniffing vigorously. His eye fell upon the cigar that Mr. Sikes was holding between his thumb and forefinger.

Mr. Sikes took umbrage. He stepped forward and held the cigar close to Mr. Gooch's nose.

"Smell it," he said, as the other jerked his head back in surprise. "That's as good a cigar as you can get anywhere on earth for ten cents—and it only costs five."

"I—I am not a smoker," Mr. Gooch made haste to explain, being a trifle overcome by Joseph's far from ingratiating manner.

"Well, I'm just telling you," announced Joseph, inserting the cigar between his back teeth with a somewhat challenging abruptness. "You say you're Ollie's relations?"

"Yes; I am his sister. I want to see him at once. Where is he?"

"Well, I guess if you are his sister you'd better come into the sitting-room and take your things off," said Mr. Sikes grudgingly. "I've heard him speak of some folks of his living over in Hopkinsville." He led the way into the sitting-room. "Make yourselves to home. I guess maybe Ollie will be down after while, unless he's gone to bed. He's all wore out. And I might as well tell you first as last," he went on pointedly, "he's occupying the only spare bedroom they've got in the house, so I don't see how I can ask you to stay the night."

Mrs. Gooch paused in the act of unwinding a thick scarf from her neck. She gave Mr. Sikes a "look."

"Are you the undertaker?" she demanded.

"The—the *what*? Good gosh, no!"

"Well, how do you happen to be running things if you are not? You act as if—"

"When did Mary die?" asked Mr. Gooch, throwing his great ulster upon the dining-table.

"She ain't dead," was all the astonished Mr. Sikes could say. "Not by a long sight."

"Well, of all the—" began Mr. Gooch, compressing his lips. "And we drove nearly eighteen miles through all this dodgasted weather to be a support and a comfort to Ollie Baxter in his trouble. You say she *ain't* dead?"

"Certainly not. Whatever put that notion in your head?"

"We had a telegram along about noon signed by Oliver, saying his wife was not expected to live through the day. All hope had been given up," said Mrs. Gooch, beginning to cry.

“That’s just like the derned fool,” said Mr. Sikes. “He can’t believe his own eyes, he’s so excited. Why, Mary and the baby are both as lively as crickets. I heard—”

“The *baby*?” fell simultaneously from the lips of Mr. and Mrs. Gooch. Both mouths remained open.

“What baby?” added Mrs. Gooch, spreading her tear-drenched eyes.

“Why, her’s and Ollie’s—Say, didn’t you know they had a baby this morning?”

“A *baby*?” gasped the lady, incredulously.

“But we didn’t know they were expecting one,” said her husband, scowling. “Mighty strange Oliver never even mentioned—”

“Are you telling the truth?” demanded Mrs. Gooch. “Or are you just trying to be funny?”

Mr. Sikes removed the cigar from his jaws. “It’s nothing to me, ma’am, whether you believe it or not,” said he.

Baxter’s brother-in-law allowed his gaze to roam around the room. “Maybe we’re in the wrong house, Ida,” he said. “We haven’t been in Rumley since Oliver set up housekeeping. Like as not, that feller down at the drug store gave us the wrong—”

“This is Oliver Baxter’s house,” said Sikes shortly. “He moved in here the day after the wedding, and he ain’t moved out of it since, far as I know.”

“And who are you?” inquired Mr. Gooch.

“Me? My name is Sikes, Joseph Sikes. I’m Ollie’s best friend, if you want to know. I stood up with him when he was married, and I’ve been standin’ up for him ever since. If you’ve got anything nasty to say about Oliver Baxter, I guess you’d better not say it in my hearin’, Mr. Gooch.”

“I have no intention of saying anything nasty about my wife’s brother,” retorted Mr. Gooch.

“I know all about you,” said Mr. Sikes, replacing his cigar and scowling darkly. “I’ve heard Ollie speak of you a hundred times. He ain’t got any use for you.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Mrs. Gooch.

“Well, I don’t mind telling you,” said Mr. Gooch, bridling, “I haven’t any use for him. I never did take any stock in brother-in-laws, anyhow, and

that's why I've never had anything to do with Baxter. You can tell him—"

"I guess you're forgettin' that you are a brother-in-law yourself, ain't you?" interrupted Mr. Sikes, with a most offensive snigger.

"Are you trying to pick a quarrel with my husband?"

"As I said before," explained Mr. Sikes, "I am Ollie Baxter's best friend, and I certainly ain't going to allow anybody like a brother-in-law to come in here at a time like this and get off any insinuations. This is the happiest day of Ollie Baxter's life—that is, it will be when he gets his right senses back—and it ain't going to be spoiled, not even behind his back, if I can help it. Especially by a brother-in-law."

"The man has been drinking," said Mrs. Gooch, sniffing the air.

"You're right," confessed Joseph promptly. "I've had a couple of good swigs out of this pint, and I'm proud of it. It helps me to say what I think about people that Ollie Baxter don't like. I've been waitin' for nearly ten years to tell you what I think of you, Mr. Gooch, for the way you acted toward Ollie when he tried to get his sister here to help pay for a tombstone for their father's grave, and you—"

"I'll thank you to mind your own business," exclaimed Mr. Gooch loudly.

"I don't want to be thanked for it," shouted Mr. Sikes. "It's my business to tell you a few things about yourself, so don't thank me."

"Oh, my goodness!" wailed Mrs. Gooch. "In my own brother's house, too. I never was so insulted in all my life. Oliver! Oliver, where are you? Come down here and order this man out of your house."

"No use yellin' for Oliver," said Mr. Sikes. "He won't hear you." Then he swallowed hard. "Come to think of it, I guess I ought to apologize, ma'am. Which I hereby do. I haven't had much sleep lately, worrying over this joyous occasion, and I guess I'm a bit crusty. I hereby welcome you to Ollie's house, speaking in his place, and ask you to have a chair over here by the stove. You can sit down too if you want to, Mr. Gooch. To show you there's no hard feelings on this joyous occasion, I'll even go so far as to ask you to have a drink out of this bottle. It's—"

"My husband does not drink," said Mrs. Gooch, stiffly.

"You might let him off just this once," pleaded Mr. Sikes, tactlessly.

Horace Gooch frowned. “I’ve never touched a drop of intoxicating liquid in my life, sir.”

Sikes opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it, choked the words off, and then offered the following substitute: “Terrible weather for this time of year, ain’t it?”

There was no response to this conciliating commonplace, nor to the invitation to sit down. Mrs. Gooch, having divested herself of coat, scarf, bonnet and overshoes, was straightening her hair before the looking-glass, while her husband surveyed the room and its contents with the disdainful air of one used to much better things.

You could tell by the expression on his face that the floor of his parlor was covered by a gorgeous Brussels instead of the many-hued rag carpet that served Oliver Baxter and his wife; and where they had old-fashioned horse-hair chairs and a sofa, he possessed articles so handsomely done in plush that it was almost a sin to occupy them. If he had not come directly from contact with a biting wind, one might have been justified in construing his frequent and audible sniffs as of scorn rather than of necessity. He was a tall, lank man with narrow shoulders, narrow face, and a pair of extremely narrow black eyes. He typified prosperity of the meaner kind. Over in Hopkinsville, Horace Gooch was considered the richest and the stingiest man in town. He was what is commonly called a “tax shark,” deriving a lucrative and obnoxious income through his practice of buying up real estate at tax-sales and holding it until it was redeemed by the hard-pressed owner, or, as it happened in many instances, acquiring the property under a provision of the state law then in operation, whereby after a prescribed lapse of time he was enabled to secure a tax deed in his own name. He also trafficked in chattel mortgages.

No one, not even his fellow church members, had ever been known to get the better of him. It must be said for him, however, he went to church twice every Sunday and invariably did his share toward spreading the gospel by dropping a noisy quarter into the collection plate at both services. And so astute a business man was he that he never was without the proper change. His brother-in-law called him a “blood-sucking skinflint,” and it is not in the power of the teller of this tale to improve upon that except by quoting from the unprintable opinions of his victims.

Mrs. Gooch was Oliver’s only sister, and had married Horace Gooch when in her teens. At thirty-eight she was still wondering if she was really good enough for him and if he had not made a mistake in marrying her when

there were so many other girls he might have had for the asking. Sometimes Horace made her feel that he could have done better. At any rate, she was never allowed to be in doubt as to what he thought of all the other Baxters, living or dead. They were as "common as dirt." At first it was difficult for her to be ashamed of Oliver without being equally disgusted with herself, but as time went on and she became more and more of a Gooch this irritating sensitiveness eased off into a state of contemptuous pity for her insignificant brother. His marriage to a toll-gate keeper's daughter sent him down several pegs in her estimation, notwithstanding Mr. Gooch's sarcastic contention that Oliver had wedded far above his station—indeed, he went on to say, he didn't believe it possible for Oliver to find any one beneath his station, no matter how hard he tried or how far he looked.

And yet when word came by wire that there was to be a death in the family, Ida Gooch overlooked everything and hastened to her brother's side, drawn not so much by sisterly affection as by the desire to take an active and public part in any family sorrow or bereavement. Having looked forward, over eighteen miles of wind-swept highways, to a house of grief, she was not only shocked but secretly annoyed to find that life instead of death had visited the humble home of her brother. She knew she would never hear the last of it from Horace, who hated babies. They had no children of their own.

But now that she was here, she was determined to make the most of the situation.

"I shall take charge here," she announced to Mr. Sikes. "Is this the way upstairs?"

Mr. Sikes nodded. "But if I was you," he said, "I'd hold my horses."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I guess you'd better ask Serepty Grimes before you begin to take charge here," said he grimly.

"Serepty who?"

"Grimes. She's running this house at present. Her husband used to run the Rumley sawmill before he died. Serepty's running it now."

"That doesn't cut any figure with me," announced Mrs. Gooch firmly. "I am going up to Mary's room—her name is Mary, isn't it?—to see what there is to do for—"

"Wait a minute, Ida," interrupted her husband. "I wouldn't go busting into that room until I found out whether I was wanted or not."

"Let her go, man," cried Mr. Sikes, eagerly. "But if she was my wife—and thank God, I'm a single man—I'd stand at the foot of the stairs to ketch her when she comes down."

"Do you mean to say that my own brother would lay violent hands—"

"Ollie Baxter? I should say not. He ain't got anything more to do with running this house than I have. Why, Serepty wouldn't let Napoleon Bonaparte into Mrs. Baxter's room if he was to come here in full uniform. But don't take my word for it. Go ahead. You might as well get it over with. I wouldn't any more think of going up them steps, big as I am, without receiving orders from her, than I'd think of sticking my head in this stove."

"I will soon get rid of Mrs. Grimes," said she, tossing her head.

As she started to leave the room, a loud knocking at the front door rose above the howl of the wind. Sikes resuming his office as master of ceremonies, pushed his way past Mrs. Gooch and opened the door to admit a woman and two men. The first to enter the sitting-room was a tall man wearing a thin black overcoat and a high silk hat. The former was buttoned close about his shivering frame, the latter jammed well down upon his ears to meet the vagaries of the tempestuous wind. This was the Reverend Herbert Sage, pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Rumley. The lady was his wife.

The other member of the trio, a fat, red-faced, jolly looking man of indeterminate age, was Silas Link, the undertaker, upholsterer and livery-man of Rumley. We encounter him now in the last-mentioned capacity, hence his cheery grin, his loud-checked trousers and his brown derby set jauntily over his right ear. He wore a buffalo-skin overcoat. In his capacity as upholsterer and furniture-repairer he affected a dusty suit of overalls of a butternut hue and wore spectacles that gave him a solemn, owl-like expression. As an undertaker he was irreproachably lachrymose despite his rosy cheeks, and he never "officiated" except in a tight-fitting Prince Albert coat, a plug hat, a white cravat and a pair of black cotton gloves. In view of the fact that he so rarely is called upon to appear in the character of undertaker, owing to the infrequency of emergencies, and also that we are likely to come in contact with him a dozen times a day as a livery-man, it is only fair to introduce him here in the most cheerful of his three rôles, especially as we may never have occasion to call upon him for repairs.

The "Reverend" Sage—he was always spoken of as the "Reverend"—was a good-looking young man of thirty, threadbare and a trifle wan, with kindly brown eyes set deep under a broad, intelligent brow. He had a wide,

generous mouth and a pleasant smile; a fine nose, a square chin, and a deep, gentle voice. For three years he had been shepherd of the Presbyterians in Rumley, and he was as poor if not actually poorer than the day he came to the town from the theological institute in Chicago. His salary was eight hundred dollars a year, exclusive of "pickings," as Mr. Baxter called the pitiful extras derived from weddings, funerals and "pound parties." Come November, there was always a "pound party" for the minister, and it was on such occasions that he received from his flock all sorts and manner of donations. His wife in one of her letters to a girl friend in Chicago mentioned twenty-six pairs of carpet slippers "standing in a row," seventeen respectfully knitted mufflers, numberless mittens and wristlets, and she couldn't tell what else until she had gone through all the drawers and closets in the parsonage.

Which brings us to the wife, and also to an absolutely unaccountable anomaly. It is not difficult to explain how he came to fall in love with her and why he married her. That might have happened to any man. Likewise it is fairly easy to understand how she came to fall in love with him, for he was dreamy-eyed and reluctant. But how she came to marry him, knowing what it meant to be the wife of an impoverished preacher, is past all understanding. She was a handsome, dashing young woman of twenty-three: the type one meets on the streets of New York or Chicago and is unable to decide whether she is rich or poor, good or bad, idle or industrious, smart or common. Certainly one would never find her counterpart in a town like Rumley except by the accident of importation, and then only as a bird of passage. When she came to Rumley as a bride in the June preceding the birth of Oliver October Baxter, Rumley was aghast. It could not believe its thousand eyes. Small wonder, then, that the precious Mrs. Gooch and her even more precious husband gazed upon her as if their own slightly distended eyes were untrustworthy.

She was tall, willowy, and startling. She wore a sealskin coat—at least it looked like seal—with sleeves that ballooned grandly at the shoulders; a picture hat that sat rakishly—(no doubt the wind had something to do with its angle)—upon a crown of black hair neatly banged in front and so extensively puffed behind that it looked for all the world like an intricate mass of sausages in peril of being dislodged at every step she took; rather stunning coral ear-rings made up of graduated globes; a slinky satin skirt of black with a long, sweeping train that, being released from her well-gloved hand, dragged swishily across the cheap rag carpet with a sort of contemptuous hiss. A roomy pair of rubber boots, undoubtedly the property of her husband, completed her costume.

“Good evening, Mr. Sikes,” she drawled, as she scuffled past him into the sitting-room. “Nice balmy weather to be born in, isn’t it?”

Mr. Sikes, taken unawares, forgot himself so far as to wink at the parson, and then, in some confusion, stammered: “St-step right in, Mrs. Sage, and have a chair. Evening, Mr. Sage. How are ye, Silas? Help yourself to a cigar. Take off your things, Mrs. Sage. Oliver will be mighty glad to see—”

“How is Mrs. Baxter, Joseph?” inquired the parson, removing his hat with an effort. It had been jammed down rather low on his head.

“The thing is,” put in Mr. Link, cheerily, as he began to shed his coat, “is old Ollie likely to pull through? I’ve been up here six or seven times to-day and dogged if I know whether to hitch up the hearse or the band wagon.”

Sikes scowled at the speaker and jerked his head significantly in the direction of the Gooches. “Come right up to the stove, Mrs. Sage,” said he, dragging a rocker forward. “You must be mighty chilly.”

“Only my legs,” announced the preacher’s wife.

Mrs. Gooch winced. In her circle, ladies never mentioned legs unless alluding to dining-room tables, or fried chickens, or animate objects such as dogs, horses, cows and sheep. And when she found out later on that this startling person was a minister’s wife, she wondered what the world was coming to. Somehow, it seemed to her, nothing could be so incongruous or so disillusioning as the wife of a preacher having legs.

“This is Oliver’s sister,” introduced Mr. Sikes, awkwardly. “From Hopkinsville. Reverend Sage, Mrs. Gooch. Mr. Link, Mrs. Gooch. And this is Oliver’s brother-in-law, her husband, also of Hopkinsville.”

Everybody bowed. “I didn’t catch the lady’s name,” said Mrs. Gooch.

“Permit me to introduce my wife,” said the Reverend Sage, advancing to the stove, rubbing his extended palms together. “A bitter night, is it not?”

“Very,” said Mrs. Gooch.

“Very,” said Mr. Gooch.

“Tough on horses,” said Mr. Link.

“Very,” said Mr. Sikes.

General conversation, after this laconic start, died suddenly. Everybody stood and looked at everybody else for a few moments, and then Mr. Sikes had a happy inspiration. He began shoveling coal from the scuttle into the

already blushing stove, making a great deal of racket. The others watched him intently, as if they never had seen anything so interesting as a stove being stuffed with fuel.

"And all sorts of live stock," added Mr. Link, apparently startled into speech by the closing of the stove door.

"From Hopkinsville, did you say?" inquired Mr. Sage politely, turning to Mr. Gooch.

"Yes," said Mr. Gooch succinctly.

"Ah, a—er—very enterprising town—very enterprising. Ahem!"

"Where is it?" asked Mrs. Sage, who by this time had seated herself in a rocking-chair, with her rubber boots well advanced toward the stove.

"I guess you haven't lived in this part of the country very long," said Mr. Gooch condescendingly.

"Oh, haven't I? I've been here nearly six months—one hundred and thirty-two days, to be exact." She glanced at the clock on the bracket between the windows. "Lacking two hours and twelve minutes," she went on. "We came down on the local that's due here at 9:14, but it was twenty-eight minutes late."

"Ahem!" coughed Mr. Sage, discreetly.

"Well, if you will excuse me," began Mrs. Gooch, withdrawing her gaze from the lady's boots, "I guess I'll run upstairs and see my sister-in-law."

"Ain't Serepty up there?" asked Mr. Link quickly.

"Yep," replied Mr. Sikes. "You needn't worry, Silas," he added significantly.

"You stay right here, Ida," ordered Mr. Gooch. "I'm not going to have you insulted by this woman they're talking so much about. You'd think she was Queen Victoria or somebody like that."

"Ahem!" coughed Mr. Sage, this time in a suave, conciliatory manner—if it is possible to cough suavely. "It is my practice, no matter what the weather may be, to call at the earliest opportunity upon any stranger who may arrive in our little community. Your nephew is the latest stranger in town, I should say—eh, Mrs. Goops?"

"My—my what?"

"Gooch is my name," broke in her husband tartly. "G, double o, c, h."

“I do wish, Herbert dear,” said Mrs. Sage languidly, “you would try to remember Gooch.”

“I beg pardon. A slip of the tongue. I was about to inquire about your dear brother, Mrs. Gooch. How is he?”

“I didn’t know there was anything the matter with Oliver.”

“There isn’t anything the matter with him,” said Mrs. Sage, “that a good, stiff drink of whiskey won’t cure.” Then catching the look in the other woman’s eye, she explained: “Oh, I’m not a native, you know. I come from Chicago—God bless it!”

“Ahem!” coughed her husband. “I suppose Sister Grimes will be down in a few minutes, Joseph?”

“Just depends,” replied Mr. Sikes, somewhat grimly.

“Wonderful woman, indeed. Quite indispensable at a time like this,” continued the minister.

“She’s just as handy at a funeral,” supplemented Mr. Link, in the hushed voice of an undertaker.

“We must remember how indispensable Mrs. Grimes is at a time like this, Herbert,” said Mrs. Sage, with a yawn.

“You won’t have to remember,” blurted out Mr. Sikes. “Serepty’ll do the remembering.”

“I adore babies, don’t you, Mrs. Gooch?”

“Yes, indeed. Ah—I—how many children have you, Mrs. Sage?”

“On pleasant Sundays I should say as many as twenty-five. They shrink quite a bit if the weather’s bad.”

“Good gracious me!”

“She means her Sunday-school class,” explained Mr. Sage hurriedly. He had the worried manner of one who never knows what is coming next.

His wife looked up into his face and smiled—a lovely, good-humored smile that was slowly transformed into a mischievous grimace.

“I’m always making breaks, am I not, Herby dear? It’s a terrible strain, Mr. Gooch, being a parson’s wife. I sometimes wish that Herbert—I mean Mr. Sage—had been a policeman or a bartender or something like that.”

“Umph!” grunted Mr. Gooch.

“Well, I suppose it ain’t as hard to live up to a policeman or a bartender as it is to live up to a minister of the gospel,” said Mrs. Gooch, feeling of the tip of her nose as she turned away from the stove.

Mr. Sikes and Mr. Link, having something of a private nature to say to each other, had retired to a position near the door, which by design or accident was pretty thoroughly blocked by their heavy figures. Mrs. Gooch sniffed unnecessarily.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Sage over her shoulder; “you’re right, Mrs. Gooch. Live and learn is my motto.” She winked at her husband.

“My dear Josephine!” exclaimed Mr. Sage reproachfully.

“Say, Ida,” burst out Mr. Gooch, who had been fretting almost audibly, “I’m getting tired of hanging around here waiting for Oliver. Get your things on. We’re going home.”

“Oh, my dear friend,” cried the pastor, “you surely are not going away without saying good-by to Brother Baxter. He will—”

“I’m going away without even saying howdy-do to him,” rasped Mr. Gooch. “Where are your overshoes, Ida?”

At this juncture the sitting-room door was opened, somewhat to the confusion of the two citizens of Rumley, and a small, plump, middle-aged woman, bearing a couple of blankets in her arms, entered the room.

“Hello, Serepty!” cried Mr. Link. “Everything all right?”

Mrs. Grimes surveyed the group. Her pleasant, wholesome face was beaming. Her gaze rested upon the astonishing hat of Mrs. Sage.

“Why, how do you do, Sister Sage. How nice of you to come out on a night like this. Mary will be pleased to hear you’ve been here. Oh, yes, Silas, everything is all right. You can go home. Nobody is going to die. How do you do, Mr. Sage. What a terrible night for you to be out, with that wretched throat of yours. If you’ll wait till I take these blankets out to warm them in the kitchen I will wrap a piece of flannel and a strip of bacon around your throat. It’s the best—”

“Don’t think of it, Sister Grimes. I am quite all right. I thought perhaps I might—ah—cheer Sister Baxter up with a little—ah—spiritual encouragement—er—a prayer of rejoicing—er—a—”

“That’s all been attended to, thank you,” broke in Mrs. Grimes crisply.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Poor Oliver has done nothing but pray since daybreak. He’s worn himself out with prayer. I had to go out in the hall a while ago and tell him to shut up. Make yourselves at home, everybody. I’ll be back in—my land!”

Mr. Baxter, coatless, disheveled and in a state of extreme anguish, came plunging down the stairs and into the room.

“Whe-where’s the doctor?” he gasped. “My God, where’s Doc Robinson? He’s dying! Hurry up, Serepty! My infant is dying! Oh me, oh my—oh me—”

“Where is your coat, Oliver Baxter?” demanded little Mrs. Grimes, severely. “Do you want to catch your death of cold?”

“Coat? Say, can’t you hear him? He is calling for help. Listen! Sh! Listen, everybody.” Then after a long period of silence in which everybody frowned and listened intently, and no sound came from aloft, he groaned: “Oh, Lord! He’s dead! Dead as a door nail!”

“I guess it was the wind you heard, Ollie,” said Mr. Link, brightly.

For the first time, Mr. Baxter allowed his gaze to concentrate upon some definite object. He stared at the undertaker-livery man, and his jaw dropped lower than ever.

“The—the undertaker,” he gulped. “How—how did you get here so soon, Silas? He ain’t been dead more than thirty seconds. He didn’t die till —”

“Calm yourself, Oliver,” admonished Mrs. Grimes, but soothingly. “Sit down. It’s nothing but a pin. I’ll go up to him as soon as I’ve fixed you.” She thrust the blankets into Mr. Gooch’s arms. “Hold these,” she said. “Come over here by the stove, Oliver. Sit down. I’ll go fix a hot mustard bath for you to stick your feet in. Give me one of those blankets—oh, excuse me, I didn’t notice you were a stranger. Who—”

“This is Ollie’s brother-in-law, Serepty,” explained Mr. Sikes. “Say, Ollie, I’ve got a great surprise for you. Your sister and her husband have come over from Hopkinsville to wish you many happy returns of the day.”

Mr. Baxter got up from the chair into which Serepty had forced him and shook hands with his relatives.

“You’ve—you’ve been drinking, Oliver,” exclaimed Mrs. Gooch, horrified.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if I had,” admitted Oliver. “It isn’t every day a feller has a—Why, good evening, Mrs. Sage. I didn’t see you come in. Where’s Mr. Sage? Ain’t he—”

“Sit down in that chair, Oliver Baxter,” commanded Mrs. Grimes. “I’m going to wrap this blanket around you.” She relieved Mr. Gooch of one of the blankets and proceeded to tuck Mr. Baxter snugly into the rocking chair. “Then I’ll get the mustard bath. Now, you sit still, do you hear me? Mary and the baby are all right. Make yourselves at home, everybody. And you, Joe Sikes, answer the door if anybody knocks.”

She snatched the other blanket away from Gooch and hurried to the kitchen. After an awkward pause, rendered painful by the presence of the two Gooches, the company made a simultaneous effort to break the ice that suddenly had clogged the flow of conversation.

“Eighteen miles through all this—”

“From your telegram we thought a death had—”

“It’s an ill wind that blows no—”

“That’s a mighty fine pair of mares you—”

“Nobody likely to knock at the—”

Young Mrs. Sage came in at the end with the following question:

“What are you going to name it, Mr. Baxter?”

“Eh? It? It ain’t an it, Mrs. Sage. It’s a masculine gender. We’re going to call him Oliver October. Sh! Isn’t that somebody on the porch, Joe? Doc Robinson, like as not. Go to the door, will you?”

“It’s the wind,” said Mr. Sikes. Nevertheless he went over and looked out of the window.

Another silence, broken at last by Mr. Baxter.

“He’s got the finest head you ever saw,” said he, with a beatific expression on his face. “Got a head like a statesman.”

“Oh, that is good news,” said the Reverend Sage, jovially. “We’re sadly in need of statesmen these days, Brother Baxter.”

“Statesmen, your granny,” exploded Mr. Gooch, now thoroughly out of patience. “That’s the trouble with this country. It’s being run entirely by statesmen. That’s what I’ve been saying since March ’89. What we need is a good, sound business man in the White House. President Harrison is a fine

lawyer, but if ever we needed a good Democrat back in the presidential chair it's now. Get rid of the statesmen. That's my motto. They've been—"

Mrs. Gooch touched his arm and whispered in his ear: "You mean politicians, Horace—politicians, *not* statesmen."

Mr. Gooch was flabbergasted. "Consarn it, I'm always getting those two words mixed," he snarled. "But anyhow, this country made the blamedest fool mistake on earth when it turned Grover Cleveland out and put these blood-sucking Republicans back in power."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Mr. Link, witheringly.

A heated political argument ensued, Mr. Gooch holding out against the Messrs. Link and Sikes, both of whom were what he finally succeeded in characterizing as "black Republicans." He also charged them with waving the "bloody shirt," and in return heard his party classified as "out and out copperheads."

Through it all, the anxious parent of Oliver October sat staring at the bright red isinglass in the stove door, oblivious to the storm of words that raged about him. Mrs. Sage, seated close beside him, finally reached out and took one of his hands in hers and squeezed it sympathetically.

"Don't you worry," she said gently.

He looked up, and a slow smile settled upon his homely features.

"You ought to see his feet," he murmured. "Little bits of things about that long. Cutest feet you ever saw."

"I'll bet they are," said she warmly, and he was happier than he had been in hours.

CHAPTER III

WOMEN IN RED SHAWLS

The Reverend Sage, withdrawing his hallowed cloth from contact with even baser politics, had moved over to one of the windows, and was gazing out between the curtains across the gale-swept porch into the blackness beyond. Through the window-light the fine snow swirled in shadowy clouds, like an ever-moving screen beyond which lay mystery. He shivered a little, poor chap, at the thought of going out again into the bitter, unbelievable night—at the thought of his cold little home at the farther end of the village where the drifts were high and the wind blew fiercely over the treeless, unsheltered tract known as Sharp's Field. He was thinking, too, of the girl he had brought down with him as a bride in the sunny days of June, when all the land was green and the air was soft and warm and there was the tang of fresh earth and the scent of flowers for grateful nostrils.

He was thinking of her and the mile walk she would have to take with him into the very teeth of the buffeting gale when this visit was over. He sighed. She had come to this wretched little town from a great city where there were horse-cars and cable-trains and hacks without number; where houses and flats were warm and snug; where the shrieking storms from off the lake were defied by staunch brick walls; where the nights were short and the days were told by hours; where there were lights and life, restaurants and theaters, music and dancing. He thought of the cheap but respectable boarding-house on the cross-street just off Lincoln Park and the warm little room on the third floor where he had lived and studied for two full years. It was in this house that he had met Josephine Judge. She was the daughter of the kindly widow who conducted the boarding-house—a tall, slim girl who used slang and was gay and blithesome, and had ambitions!

Ambitions? She wanted to become an actress. She was stage-struck. It was quite wonderful, the way she could mimic people, and "recite," and sing the sprightly songs from "Pinafore," "La Mascotte," "Fra Diavolo," "Fatinitza," "The Bohemian Girl," and could quote with real unction the choicest lines of "Rosalind," "Viola," "Juliet" and other rare young women of a flowery age. And she had made him and all the rest of the boarders laugh when she "took off" Pat Rooney, Joe Murphy, the Kernells, Gus Williams, "Oofty Gooft" and the immortal "Colonel Mulberry Sellers."

He was not a theatre-going youth. He had been brought up with an abhorrence for the stage and all its iniquities. So he devoted himself, heart and soul, to the saving of the misguided maiden, with astonishing results. They fell in love with each other and were married. He often smiled—and he smiled even now as he gazed pensively out into the night—when he recalled the alternative she proposed and continued to defend up to within a day or two of the wedding. She wanted him to give up the pulpit and go on the stage with her! She argued that he was so good-looking and had such a wonderful voice, that nothing—absolutely nothing!—could keep him from becoming one of the most popular "leading men" in the profession. She went so far as to declare that he would make a much better actor than a preacher anyhow—and, besides, the stage needed clean, upright young men quite as badly as the church needed them!

And now she was down here in this desolate little town, loyally doing her best to be all that a country parson's wife should be, working for him, loving him,—and, if the truth must be told—surreptitiously delighting him with frequent backslidings to Pat and Joe and Gus, including occasional terpsichorean extravagances that would have got her "churched" if any one else had witnessed them.

He was always wondering what the people of Rumley thought of her. He knew, alas, what she thought of the people of Rumley. His heart swelled a little as he glanced over his shoulder and saw her patting the hand of the distracted Baxter. She was his Josephine, and she was a warm-hearted, beautiful creature who was bound to be misunderstood by these—He was conscious of a sudden, unchristian-like hardening of his jaws, and was instantly ashamed of the hot little spasm of resentment that caused it.

The political adversaries were now shouting at each other with all the ridiculous intensity of mid-campaign lunatics, and there was a great deal of finger-shaking and pounding of clenched fists upon open palms. Young Mr. Sage cringed as he turned his face to the window again, and if he had given utterance to his feelings he would have petrified the arguers by roaring:

"Oh, shut up, you jackasses!"

He drew back with an exclamation. The light fell full upon a face close to the window pane, a face so startling and so vivid that it did not appear to be real. A pair of dark, gleaming eyes met his for a few seconds; then swiftly the face was withdrawn, retreating mysteriously into the shadowy wall beyond the circle of light. He leaned forward and peered intently. Two indistinct figures took shape in the unrelieved darkness at the corner of the

porch—two women, he made out, huddled close together, their faces barely discernible through the swirling veil of snow.

He experienced a queer little sensation of alarm, a foreboding of evil. The face—that of a person he had never seen before, some one strange to Rumley—was swarthy and as clean-cut as if fashioned with a chisel. It was framed in scarlet—a bright scarlet speckled with vanishing blotches of white.

He turned quickly and spoke to Sikes.

"There are two women out on the porch, Joseph. Strangers. Perhaps you'd better see what they want."

"—and if Tilden *was* elected, why in thunder did the majority of the voters of this here United States allow the Republicans to—"

"—and what's more, if Hayes wasn't honestly elected, why did the people turn in and elect a Republican, James A. Garfield, in 1880? That's proof enough for me—"

"—Tilden had nearly half a million more votes than—"

"—And if the niggers had been allowed to vote in the South—"

"Oh, cheese it!"

Now this undignified exclamation was not uttered by either of the arguers; nevertheless it terminated the discussion so abruptly that for a moment or two it seemed that all three had suffered a simultaneous stroke of paralysis. They turned to confront and to stare open-mouthed at the wife of the minister, who had risen and was facing them with blazing eyes.

The horrified Mrs. Gooch, who had preserved a tremulous neutrality throughout the windy discussion, believed—and continued to believe to her dying day—that the brazen, overdressed young woman took the name of the Savior in vain when she gave vent to that astonishing command. (In witness whereof it is only necessary to record the declaration she made to her husband, sotto voce, a little later on: "Horace, if I live to be a thousand years old I'll never get over the way that woman spoke the Christian name of our Lord Jesus Christ. It was positively outrageous.")

Young Mrs. Sage, having thus impulsively reverted to slang, proceeded to amplify its effectiveness. She went on:

"Give us a rest, can't you? Go chase yourselves! Where do you think you are? In a beer saloon? If you want to shoot off your mouths about—"

"My *dear* Josephine!" cried Mr. Sage, screwing up his face as if in pain.

"Oh, Lord!" she breathed, staring bleakly at her husband.

A close observer might have noted the sudden quivering of her lower lip, instantly lost, however, in the shamed and penitent smile that wiped away every trace of the irritation aroused by the argument. "There I go again! Backsliding almost to Grand Crossing. In another minute I would have been in Chicago. Good thing you stopped me, Herbert. And I sha'n't in the least mind if you give me a good thrashing when you get me home. It's the only way to break me of—"

"Go for 'em—go for 'em, Mrs. Sage," cried Mr. Baxter. "Give 'em hell! They ain't got any right to whoop and yell like that in this house. They'll wake the baby—if it ain't dead—and—"

"They'd wake it if it *was* dead," said Mrs. Grimes, coming from the kitchen at that moment with a steaming pail in her hand.

"Never mind, Josephine," said Mr. Sage gently. "I am sure our good friends will overlook—oh, by the by, Joseph, there are two strange women on the porch. Perhaps you—"

"Go see who it is, Joe," commanded Mrs. Grimes crisply. "You come upstairs now, Oliver, and put your feet in this pail of mustard and water. Come on, now. Say good night to—"

"But, doggone it, I don't want to go upstairs. I don't want to put my feet in—"

"Do you want that boy of yours to be an orphan before he's hardly had his eyes open?" demanded Mrs. Grimes, severely. "Well, that's what he'll be if you catch lung fever."

"Better do what Serepty says, Ollie," advised Mr. Link.

"That's right, Ollie," added Mr. Sikes. "You go on upstairs. I'll say good night to everybody for you."

"You go and see who's out there on the porch, Joe Sikes. Don't let any strangers in, do you hear? Oh, yes, Mr. Sage, I almost forgot. I fixed up a nice gargle for you—salt and pepper and hot vinegar. It's on the kitchen table. There's a strip of bacon laying there too. I'll bring down one of Mr. Baxter's wool socks to tie around—For goodness' sake, Joe Sikes, shut that door before you open the front door. Do you want to freeze us all to death?"

“Wonderful manager, ain’t she?” confided Mr. Link in an aside to the minister.

“I see no reason why I should gargle a perfectly well throat and tie a sock of Brother Baxter’s—”

“You’d better do it,” broke in the other hastily. “She knows what’s best.”

“I tell you I’m not going upstairs, Serepty. I got a right to set here and receive congratulations, and I’m going to do it. And I’m going to set ’em up to cigars—and if anybody wants a drink of whiskey on me all they got to do is to say so. You let me alone, Serepty. I’m all right. You go up and see if everything’s all right with Mary and Oliver October. I’m going to set right here and—”

“I’ll put this mustard bath in the spare room, Oliver,” interrupted Mrs. Grimes sternly. “It will be ready for you when you come up—before long.”

Mrs. Gooch whispered to her glowering husband: “I don’t see anything about her to be afraid of. Why, she ain’t much bigger than a minute, is she?”

Tall Mr. Gooch eyed little Mrs. Grimes dubiously. “I don’t know,” said he in reply. “They say Napoleon was a little feller.”

“Did I spill the beans all over the shop, Herby dear?” murmured the guilty Mrs. Sage, looking up at her husband much as a culprit looks up at his judge.

“I do wish, Josephine, you would be a *little* more careful what you say,” said he, lowering his voice as he bent over her. “Please try to remember your —our position here. It is—”

His mild admonition was interrupted by the abrupt return of Joseph Sikes, who, in his excitement, neglected to close not only the sitting-room door but the one opening on to the porch. Mrs. Gooch, as if jumping at the opportunity, sneezed violently and transfixed him with an accusing look.

“Say, Ollie,” burst out Mr. Sikes, “there’s a couple of women out here from that gypsy camp. They claim to be fortune-tellers. What’ll I do about ’em?”

“Fortune-tellers?” cried Mrs. Sage eagerly. “I adore fortune-tellers.”

“Frauds, my dear—unholy frauds,” remonstrated Mr. Sage.

“What do they want, Joe?” inquired Baxter.

“Well, one of ’em wants to tell the baby’s fortune. Says she heard about him a couple of weeks ago and she’s been talking to the stars ever—”

“Good gracious! That proves what a liar she is,” cried Mrs. Grimes.

“Wait a minute,” exclaimed Mr. Sikes. “Hold your horses, Serepty. She says she knowed a couple of weeks ago that he was going to be born to-day, that’s what she says. And if that ain’t reading the future, I’d like to know what it is. Now here’s what she says she can do. She says she can tell exactly what an infant’s future life is going to be if she can get at him before his first two sunrises. Guarantees it.”

“Well, I’m not going to allow any gypsy woman to go nigh that infant. I never saw a gypsy in my life that looked as if she’d ever seen a cake of soap. Send ’em away, Joe.”

“But, Serepty,” argued Sikes, “don’t you know what might happen if we make ’em mad? They put a curse on you that won’t ever come off. Now, I don’t think we ought to take a chance—”

“They sha’n’t go near that baby, so that settles it.”

“Well, I should say not,” exclaimed Mrs. Gooch loudly.

“Wait a minute,” said Sikes, struck by an idea. He hurried to the front door. As he passed into the hall, Horace Gooch strode over and slammed the sitting-room door after him.

“Say, Serepty,” began Mr. Baxter, a pleading note in his voice, “I’d kind of like to know whether my son is going to be President of the United States some day.”

“How would you like it if she was to tell you he’s going to turn out to be a jail-bird or something like that, Oliver Baxter?”

“Oh, but they never tell you anything unpleasant, you know,” said Mrs. Sage, nudging Mr. Baxter.

“My dear Josephine, please do not—”

Once more Mr. Sikes burst into the room—and again he left the door open.

“She says it ain’t necessary to even see the baby. When they’re as young as he is, it’s always her rule to tell their fortunes sight unseen. What’s more, she says if all she says don’t come true she’ll refund the money. Nothing could be fairer than that.”

“Nothing,” agreed Mr. Baxter enthusiastically.

“Absolutely fair,” put in Mr. Link.

“How can she tell a fortune without seeing the object of it?” demanded Mrs. Gooch.

“Well,” began Mr. Sikes, and then was forced to scratch his head for want of a convincing answer. “Wait a minute. I’ll see.” He hurried out again.

“Old Bob Hawkins that used to drive the hearse for me had his fortune told just about two weeks after he got married, and every word of it came true,” said Mr. Link. “He always claimed if he’d had it told two or three weeks sooner he might have had enough sense to skip out or something.”

“It is all poppycock,” announced Mr. Sage. “The veriest poppycock.”

“I had mine told,” said his wife, “when I was nineteen. It said I was going to marry a dark-complexioned man and go on a long journey.”

“Well, there you are,” said Mr. Baxter triumphantly. “The Reverend Sage is a brunette and it’s considerably over a hundred miles from Chicago to Rumley. There’s something in it, Serepty. Here’s proof that can’t be denied.”

“It’s all as simple as falling off a log,” announced Mr. Sikes, from the door. “She says the only reliable and genuine way to tell a baby’s fortune is by reading its father’s hand. That’s the way it’s been done ever since—er—astronomy was invented.”

Mr. Baxter arose. “Bring her in, Joe. Now, don’t kick, Serepty. My mind’s made up. I’m going to have my way for once.”

“Like as not she’ll tell you bad news, Oliver,” protested his sister. “I wish you wouldn’t.”

“Anyhow,” said Mr. Gooch surlily, “it’s a good way to get the door closed.”

CHAPTER IV

HIS FORTUNE—GOOD AND BAD

Mr. Sikes, taking no chance on having Baxter's order vetoed by Serepta, rushed from the room. A moment later he returned, followed by two shivering women who stopped just inside the door and apologetically smirked upon the waiting group. One of them, evidently the leader, was a woman of middle-age—swarthy, keen-eyed, sardonic of expression. A thick red shawl covered her hair, drawn close under the chin by a brown, claw-like hand. She wore a man's overcoat; the tips of a pair of heavy boots peeped out from beneath the bottom of her dirty yellow petticoat. Her companion, much younger and quite handsome in a bold, sullen way, also wore a scarlet shawl about her head; she was dressed very much after the pattern of her senior.

"Here we are," announced Mr. Sikes, with a wave of his hand.

"Shut the door," ordered Mrs. Grimes.

The host, with a nervous sort of geniality, beckoned to the strangers. "Better come down to the fire, Queen," he said.

They did not move. The elder woman fixed a curious look upon Mr. Baxter.

"I am the queen of the gypsies, Mister, but how came you to know it?" she asked in a hoarse, not unmusical voice.

"Always best to be on the safe side," said Baxter, with his jolliest laugh. "There are so blamed many gypsy queens running around loose these days that—"

The gypsy silenced him with an imperious gesture. "There is but one true queen of the gypsies. I am the true queen of all the Romanies. And you, Mister, are the father of a noble, handsome son—a prince."

"Well, by gosh!" exclaimed Mr. Link in astonishment. "That does beat all!"

"Don't tell me there's nothing in fortune-telling," said Mr. Baxter, cackling again. "Come up by the fire, Queen. Warm yourself. And you too, Miss."

The two women, after a glance at each other, slowly advanced to the stove and held out their hands to the warmth. The younger of the two fastened her gaze upon Mrs. Sage. A covetous light gleamed in her black eyes as she took in the fur coat and the wondrous hat.

"Bring in a couple of chairs from the kitchen, Joe," ordered the host. "Set down, everybody. Put on a little more coal, will you, Horace? How did you know about me, Queen?" He seemed to expand a little with his own rather vicarious importance.

The gypsy waited impressively until the chairs were produced.

"The stars brought me the news," she said, and sat down, signaling her companion that it was now permissible for her to do the same. "They make no mistakes. I am the chosen mouthpiece of the stars. I speak only of the things they tell me."

"Umph!" from Mr. Gooch.

The two women looked at him so piercingly that he turned away, conscious of a most uncomfortable feeling.

"The stars, Mister, witnessed the birth of your son a hundred thousand years ago—his birth and also his death," said the "queen," satisfied with the squelching of the scoffer. "They also looked down upon your own deathbed, Mister, a hundred thousand years ago."

There was an awed silence while the company sought mentally for a solution to this tremendous and incomprehensible enigma.

"Look here, Ollie," said Mr. Link, blatantly jocular; "if you've been dead as long as all that you ought to be buried. You stop in at my office in the morning."

This remark properly was ignored by the gypsy queen. She paid no attention to the strained laugh that followed the undertaker's sally. She sat hunched forward in the chair, her chin in her hands.

"The stars travel through space at the rate of a million miles a minute," she said oracularly. "How long, Mister, would it take mortal man to travel a million miles?"

The question, addressed abruptly to Mr. Baxter, found him at a loss for an answer. All he could do was to shake his head helplessly.

"I see it is beyond you," she went on. "So fast travel the stars that in one day, such as ours, they have put behind them a hundred thousand of the tiny

things we call years."

No one present was prepared to dispute the statement.

"Even as I speak to you now, Mister, my words are as ancient history to the stars. So! I lift my hand. The stars are a thousand years older than they were before I lifted it. Do you understand, Mister? Is it not clear to you?"

"Not very," confessed Mr. Baxter, humbly.

"See. I snap my fingers. Not in scorn for your ignorance, but to illustrate. While I was snapping my fingers, some of the stars shot through a million miles of space, taking thousands of our years to do it."

"Mathematically—" began Mr. Sage, but got no further. The gypsy proceeded, impressively:

"They have witnessed all that is to transpire on this earth of ours during the next thousand years or two."

"By gosh—it sounds reasonable," said Mr. Link. "I never thought of it in that way before."

"Will you permit me to inquire, my good woman, what college—what great seat of learning—you attended?" inquired Mr. Sage ironically.

"College?" she inquired, a trifle blankly.

"You speak the language of a cultivated woman. You use good English. You have colossal figures on the tip of your tongue. You—"

"I speak many languages," she broke in. "The language of the stars is older than any of them. There were stars in the East when the Savior was born. They were there when this world was made and peopled with ignorant men and women. They saw from afar the birth of your Savior a million years before he was—"

"My dear Brother Baxter," cried the parson, "this is perfect nonsense. Have you the impudence, Madam, to imply that we mortals are so far behind the times as all this?"

"I know of nothing, Reverend Sir, that proves the fact more clearly than the institution you represent," said the gypsy, with a rare smile.

"Goodness, what beautiful teeth!" murmured Mrs. Sage admiringly.

"The best I can say for you, Madam," said Mr. Sage, returning the smile, "is that right or wrong, honest or dishonest, you are nobody's fool."

“I can see beyond the end of my nose,” rejoined the woman cryptically.

The parson laughed. “And so, according to your gospel, I am now treading the streets of the Celestial City, and have been doing so for a million years without knowing it?”

With the utmost seriousness the gypsy replied: “If you will cross my palm with a piece of silver, good Pastor, I may be able to state positively whether you are there—or in the other place.”

The parson’s wife clapped her hands. “Give her a quarter, Herbert,” she cried, mischievously. “It certainly is worth that much to find out whether we’re wasting our youth trying to—”

“Ahem! My dear Josephine! In the first place, I do not have to be told that I am going to heaven when I die. I live in faith. I have no doubt as to the future.”

At this point Mr. Baxter’s interest in the project got the better of his politeness.

“We’re wasting time. Let’s get down to business. Do you mean to say, Queen, that you can look at my hand and tell what’s ahead of my boy upstairs?”

“First, you must cross my palm with silver. It is a bitter night, Mister. I have come far through the storm to serve you. You are poor, but so am I. I have earned more than one piece of silver, but I will be content with what you may give.”

“I believe I’ll take a chance on it,” said Baxter, with a defiant glance at Mrs. Grimes and the supercilious Gooches.

Mrs. Grimes was deeply though secretly impressed by the words and manner of the gypsy. She nodded her head and Baxter brightened. Mr. Gooch, however, exclaimed:

“Don’t be a fool, Baxter. Money don’t grow on bushes.”

Young Mrs. Sage jumped up from her chair. “I’ve got an idea,” she cried briskly. “Suppose we all chip in a silver piece toward the fortune of Oliver October. It’s his birthday, so let’s start him off right. You pass the hat, Mr. Sikes. Chip in for me, Herbert. I left my purse on the piano.”

“I didn’t know you had a piano,” said Mrs. Grimes, pricking up her ears.

“Figure of speech,” said Mrs. Sage, airily. “If I had a piano I would have left my purse upon it if I had a purse.”

There was a jingling of small coins in several pockets. The swarthy faces of the two gypsies brightened. Horace Gooch glanced at his big watch—a silver one—and said sharply:

"Didn't I tell you to get your things on, Ida? We've got a long, cold drive ahead of us." Then, somewhat defiantly: "Besides, I haven't got anything smaller than a silver dollar. No baby's fortune is worth a dollar."

"I guess the queen can change a dollar for you, Mr. Gooch," said Mrs. Grimes. "Joe, if you have a spare quarter, put it in for me. I'll hand it back to-morrow."

Sikes picked up the parson's stove-pipe hat and, fishing some coins out of his pocket, dropped two of them into the hollow depths of the "tile."

"That's for me and Serepty. Come on, Silas. Shell out."

Link flipped a coin into the hat. "There's a quarter. Now you can change that dollar for—er—for Ollie's brother-in-law."

"After all, it is a harmless experiment," announced Mr. Sage, but dubiously, "and it may prove diverting. In any case, my dear, we will not miss the—er—the—the thirty-five cents." As he dropped the coins into the hat, he leaned over and whispered in her ear: "There goes the jar of cold cream you were wanting, my dear."

Oliver October's parent was embarrassed. "It ain't right for you folks to be squandering all this money on account of little Oliver October. You can't afford it. 'Specially Horace."

"What's that?" snapped Mr. Gooch, reddening. "What do you think I am? A pauper?" With that he tossed a silver dollar into the hat. "That's the kind of a sport I am."

"Oh, Horace!" cried his wife, starting. "That was a dollar."

"I know it was. Why?"

"Oh—nothing. Only—only you acted as if it was a dime."

"How much you got, Joe?" inquired Silas.

"Two-ten. Put your money back in your pocket, Ollie. She ought to tell all our fortunes for two-ten."

But Baxter, ignoring him, dropped a dollar into the hat, an act of vanity which drew from Mrs. Grimes a little squeak of dismay.

"Goodness, Oliver Baxter! The child's got to have clothes."

“How do you know it has to have clothes?” demanded Baxter. “Wait till the queen gets through telling what’s going to happen to him before you go to prophesying on your own account.”

“I wish I’d put you to bed when I started to awhile ago,” was her retort.

Mrs. Gooch, who had been a silent and disapproving witness to all this prodigality, piped up: “I was fool enough to have my fortune told at the county fair once. By a trained canary bird. For ten cents only.”

“You never told me about it, Ida,” said Mr. Gooch sourly.

Sikes turned the money over to Baxter. “Cross her palm with it, Ollie,” said he.

“What guarantee is there that we get our money’s worth?” demanded Mr. Gooch, crinkling his eyes a little as he listened to the jingle of the coins which Baxter shifted noisily from one hand to the other while Sikes was arranging the chairs in a semi-circle about the central figures.

The “queen” looked hard at the speaker. “We all come into the world by chance, Mister,” she said. “We exist by chance and we are destroyed by chance. The child’s future depends on chance. I can give no guarantee. Who shall say whether I speak truly or falsely until time has given its testimony?”

“A remarkably clever woman,” murmured Mr. Sage, as he seated himself.

“I’d hate to hear any bad news about little Oliver October,” said Baxter anxiously.

“You must accept the bad with the good, Mister. Our fortunes run over a road of many turnings, through many snares and pitfalls. Fate directs us. Each of us has a guiding star. We travel by the light it sheds. Your baby was born under his own star. His fate is known to that star.”

“Hold out your hand. I’ll say in advance that I don’t believe in fortune-telling, so if you tell me anything bad it won’t make any difference. Before you begin, I guess I’ll run upstairs and see if he is still all right.”

“You stay away from that baby, Oliver Baxter,” exclaimed Mrs. Grimes. “Like as not these gypsies carry all sorts of awful diseases around with ’em. Sit down, I say. I won’t have any strangers busting in and frightening that child.”

“Great Scott, Serepty! You don’t call *me* a stranger, do you?”

“He don’t know you from Adam,” was the stern reply.

“Or Eve, for that matter,” added Mrs. Sage, with a snicker.

“I do wish, Josephine, you would remember—”

“Sh! She’s ready to begin,” interrupted Baxter.

The company drew their chairs closer as the coins were dropped one by one into the gypsy’s palm. She deliberately drew up her thick skirt and slipped them into a pocket of her petticoat. Then she seized one of Baxter’s hands in her own and fixed him with her brilliant, searching eyes. Silence pervaded the room. Every eye was on the dark, impassive face of the fortune-teller. Presently, after a few strange passes with her free hand, she lowered her eyes and began to study the creases in the Baxter palm.

A particularly violent blast of wind roared and whistled about the corners of the house, rattling the windows in their frames and peppering the panes with a fusillade of sleet. The younger gypsy drew her shawl closer about her chin and slunk a little deeper into the chair.

“A tough night on horses,” said Mr. Link, and then cleared his throat hastily.

“Maybe you’d sooner be alone, Ollie,” said Mr. Sikes, considerately.

“I wouldn’t be left alone with her for anything, Joe.”

The gypsy began, in a deep, monotonous, rather awesome tone.

“I see a wonderful child. He is strong and sturdy. In the hand of his father the stars have laid their prophecy. It is very clear. This babe will grow up to be a fine—Ah, wait! Yes, a very remarkable man.”

Another long silence, broken sacrilegiously by Mr. Sikes.

“I could have told you that, Ollie, for nothing,” he said.

“Sh!”

“I can see this son of yours, Mister, as a leader of men. Great honor is in store for him, and great wealth.”

“They invariably say that,” said Mr. Sage, smiling.

“Sh!” hissed Baxter fiercely.

“He is in uniform. Of the military, I believe, although the vision is not yet entirely clear. I do not recognize the uniform.”

“Have you ever seen a general?” inquired Mr. Baxter, wistfully.

Mr. Link interposed. “I know what it is. Many’s the time that infant’s father has marched in a funeral procession wearing a Knights of Pythias uniform. Does the hat appear to have a long white plume on it, Queen?”

“There will be wars, Mister, bloody wars,” went on the gypsy, paying not the slightest attention to the obliging undertaker. “I see men in uniform following your son—many men, Mister, and all of them armed.”

“Sounds like the police to me,” observed Mrs. Sage.

“Do they catch him?” cried Mrs. Grimes breathlessly.

“He puts away the trappings of war,” continued the imperturbable seeress. “I see him as a successful man, at the head of great undertakings. He is still young. He has been out of college but a few years.”

“That will please his mother,” said Baxter, sniffling. “She has always wanted that boy to go to college.”

“Sh!” put in Mr. Sikes testily.

“Alas! He will have a great sorrow before he is ten. I can see death standing beside him. He will lose some one who is very dear to him.”

“Aha!” ejaculated Mr. Gooch, as if here was something to relish.

Mr. Baxter laughed shrilly but mirthlessly. “Look close, Queen,” he said. “I bet it’s me he’s going to lose.”

“Nay. Some one nearer to him than his father.”

“Stop!” said he soberly, trying to withdraw his hand. “I don’t want to hear any more. If you mean his—his mother, why, you’ll have to stop.”

Some coaxing and a little ridicule on the part of the spectators decided Baxter. He laughed and, edging forward on his chair, ordered the gypsy to continue.

“Let me go back a little,” she droned. “The vision is clearer. He will come out of college at the top of his class, with great honors. Then, soon after, will come the wars. He will fight in foreign lands.”

“That bears out what I’ve claimed for years,” said Mr. Link. “We’ve got to lick England again.”

“Your son will have many narrow escapes, Mister, but he will come home to his mother, safe and sound.”

"I thought you said she was going to die before he was ten," said Mr. Gooch.

Covert glances passed between the two gypsies, the younger now being wide awake. The fortune-teller bent low over the Baxter palm and studied it more carefully.

"I—I seem to see a strange woman," she muttered. "Perhaps it is his step-mother. It is possible that you will marry again, Mister."

"You're off your base there, Queen," said Mr. Baxter firmly. "It *ain't* possible."

"This is all humbug, Brother Baxter."

"A great deal more is being revealed to me by the light of the star, Mister," urged the gypsy, now eager to give good measure. "Shall I go on?"

"After what you said about me being likely to get married again, all I got to say is that I don't believe a derned word of anything you've told me. That boy's never going to have a step-mother unless he has a step-father first."

"You feel the same way about step-mothers that I do about brother-in-laws," put in Mr. Sikes.

"Go on, Queen," commanded Mr. Baxter.

"I see a great white house and a building with a huge dome upon it. Your son will sit in the halls of state, in the councils of his land. Ah, the vision grows dim again. It may mean that he will decline the greatest honor the people of this land could confer upon him."

"Oh, dear," gulped Mrs. Grimes. "You don't mean to say he will refuse to be President?"

"It's more likely he'll be running on the Republican ticket," said Mr. Gooch, grinning at Mr. Link.

"Sh! How old is little Oliver by this time, Queen?" inquired Baxter. "I mean how far have you got him by now?"

"He is nearing thirty. Rich, respected and admired. He will have many affairs of the heart. I see two dark women and—one, two—yes, three fair women."

Mrs. Sage sighed. "At last it begins to look like real trouble."

"That would seem to show that he's going to be a purty good-looking sort of a feller, wouldn't it?" said Baxter, proudly.

“He will grow up to be the image of his father, Mister.”

“Now she’s telling you the unpleasant things you were dreading, Oliver,” said Gooch.

The gypsy leaned back in her chair, spreading her hands in a gesture of finality.

“I see no more,” she said. “The light of the star has faded out. So! Are you not pleased?”

“Is that all? Well, all I got to say is that you got a good deal of money for telling me something that I’ve been dreaming about for I don’t know how long.”

Mrs. Gooch sniffed. “She’s just like all the rest of these thieving gypsies. They’re all frauds and liars. Telling fortunes and stealing children is all they know how to do. If I had my way, they’d all be locked up.”

The two gypsies leaned forward, their hands close to the stove, their heads almost touching. There was nothing in their actions or manner to indicate that they heard the foregoing remarks. Nevertheless, they scowled unseen and there was evil in their black eyes.

“Anybody could have told you all that she did, Oliver,” complained Mrs. Grimes, “but that wouldn’t make it true, would it? Three dollars and ten cents for all that rubbish!”

“And they’ll be robbing your hen roost before morning, Baxter,” said Mr. Gooch.

“Well,” mused Baxter, “the only really unpleasant thing that’s going to happen to Oliver October, far as I can make out, is that he’s going to look exactly like me. That *is* purty rough, ain’t it, Mrs. Sage?”

“At any rate,” said she, “he will have the satisfaction of being unmistakably recognized as a wise son.”

The gypsies were preparing to depart. Their shifty eyes wandered over the heads of the company, taking in the meager contents of the room. There was a pleased leer on the lips of the younger of the two. Mr. Baxter arose.

“Taking it by and large, Queen,” he said, “I guess you took us all in purty neatly. I ain’t blaming you. It’s your business to pick out the easiest kind of fools and then soak it to ’em.”

The “queen” drew herself erect and gave him a look that would have done credit to the most regal personage in the world.

“Would you offer insult to the queen of the gypsies?” she demanded coldly.

“It ain’t insulting you, is it, to call ourselves fools?”

For answer, outraged royalty reached into her pocket and drew out the silver.

“I could throw your accursed silver into your face,” she almost shouted. As she drew back her arm as if to carry out the threat, her wrist was seized by her companion, who whispered fiercely in her ear. “No, no!” the “queen” answered, “I will not do as you say, Magda. I will not be cruel. Let the fool be happy while he may. I have been kind to him. He jeers at me because I have stopped when I might have gone on and told him the dreadful things —”

“Tell him!” cried the other. “Tell him everything.”

“Open the door, Joe!” commanded Baxter. “Get out, both of you.”

The “queen” turned on him furiously. “Stay! I am about to tell you all that I saw in the hand of that baby’s father.” Her eyes were hard and cruel, her voice raised in anger. “You scoff at me. For that you shall have the truth. All that I have told you will come true. But I did not tell you of the end that I saw for him. Hark ye! This son of yours will go to the gallows. He will swing from the end of a rope.” She was now speaking in a high shrill voice; her hearers sat open-mouthed, as if under a spell that could not be shaken off. “It is all as plain as the noonday sun. He will never reach the age of thirty. All good fortune will desert him in the last year of his life. The very first vision I had when I took your hand was the sight of a young man swinging in the air with a rope around his neck. A solemn group of men look on. They watch him swing to and fro. He jerks and writhes and then at last is still. That is all. That is the end. I have spoken the truth. You forced me to do so. I go. Come, Magda!”

They were nearing the door before the silence caused by this staggering revelation was shattered by Mr. Sikes, who was the first to recover from the momentary paralysis that had gripped the entire company. The burly feed store proprietor, superstitious but far from sentimental, sprang forward and intercepted the two women.

“Hold on, there! I don’t believe a damn’ word of it—and neither does Mr. Baxter, no matter if he does look white about the gills. You’re sore, and you’re saying all this for spite.”

The queen lifted her chin haughtily. “You will see,” she proclaimed. “Wait till the end of his twenty-ninth year before you say it is spite.”

“Say,” broke in Mr. Link shrewdly, “he’s got to commit murder before they can hang him, ain’t he?”

“I have not said that he would be a murderer,” was the reply, but not until after she had taken the time to deliberately button her coat and readjust her headgear.

“Did you not say you saw him swinging to and fro at the end of a rope?” demanded Silas, accusingly.

“Yes—I—I—that is what I said,” she stammered, and sent a malevolent, challenging look at the smiling churchman.

“The woman is a fraud,” said the latter, shrugging his shoulders. “Cheer up, Brother Baxter. No such fate awaits your son.”

“Well, what I was about to say,” went on Mr. Link, “is this. All we got to do is to bring that boy up not to commit murder. We simply got to educate him so’s he won’t ever think of doing anything like that. Learn him to hold his temper down. Soon as he’s old enough to understand, we’ll begin talking to him about the—er—wages of sin, and so forth. That’ll fix it all right, Ollie. So don’t you believe a derned word she said to you.”

But Mr. Baxter was not so much dismayed as he was dejected. He stared bleakly before him. “The trouble is,” said he, shaking his head mournfully, “there’s a lot of it I want to believe. And if I believe any of it, I’ve got to believe all of it. So what’s the sense of little Oliver being one of the grandest men in the United States if he’s got to be hung before the United States finds it out? Here! Where are you going, Serepty? Don’t leave me.”

“I am going out to get a kettle of boiling water and then I’m going to make that woman wish she’d stayed out where it’s cold. The idea of that poor little innocent baby being a bloodthirsty murderer! If you’re here when I get back, I’ll scald you—”

The gypsy made haste to intercept the bristling Serepta.

“He will not be guilty of the crime for which he is to suffer,” was her sententious conclusion. “Have I not said he would grow up to be a noble and righteous man? He will never do evil. He will be unjustly accused of slaying a fellow man. He will die on the gallows an innocent victim of the law. That is all. I have spoken. I have told you his fate as the stars have revealed it to

me. You may believe me or not, as you like. Hold! You need not bother, Mister. Magda will open the door."

It was a speechless, unsmiling group that watched the vagabond women pass from the room. No one spoke until the front door closed with a bang. The crunching of snow on the porch followed, and then for a brief space, the loud ticking of the clock on the shelf. The sophisticated Mrs. Sage was bereft of all inclination to banter; she was wide-eyed and solemn. Even her husband was impressed; as for Baxter and the others one might have been justified in suspecting that they were already witnessing the horrible execution of the infant Oliver.

A wild, prolonged shriek of the wind, yowling up from the black stretches of Death Swamp, caused more than one person in the room to shudder. The humane Mr. Link closed his eyes but opened them immediately, and said, with less conviction however than on former occasions:

"It's a tough night for horses."

Mr. Sikes bethought himself to poke up the fire. He did it with such vigor that every one was grateful to him; the prodigious noise and clatter he was making relieved the tension.

Baxter screwed his face up into a wry grin, but for once forebore cackling. He drew a singularly boisterous and unanimous laugh by remarking dryly:

"I wish we had a canary bird here, Ida, to cheer us up a bit."

"Keep that blanket up close around your neck and shoulders, Oliver Baxter," ordered Serepta Grimes briskly. "You'll be having croup if you ain't careful. Mrs. Gooch, you and your husband can sleep in the spare room to-night. Mr. Baxter will take the back bedroom over the kitchen. It's warmer than any other room in the house. Good night, everybody. I'll go up the back way with the warm blanket for Oliver October."

With her departure, Mr. Baxter seemed suddenly to realize that something was expected of him as host.

"Sit down, everybody," he invited, and that was the extent of his hospitality. He lapsed into a brooding silence, pulling feebly at the drooping ends of his mustache. His mood was contagious. The company, one and all, appeared to be thinking profoundly. At last the Reverend Sage spoke.

"There's nothing in it—absolutely nothing."

Mrs. Sage came out of a dark reverie to inquire blandly of Mrs. Gooch if she was intending to spend the night.

"I'm sure I don't know," replied Baxter's sister. "I've had my things on and off three times."

Mr. Link pondered aloud. "If little Oliver grows up to be as wise as Solomon, as she seems to think, I'll bet my last cent he'll be able to get around any law that ever was made."

Suddenly Baxter startled them all by slapping his leg resoundingly. His face was beaming.

"By ginger, I've thought of a way to upset that doggoned prophecy. I'll wait till little Oliver is purty well grown up and then I'll up and move to a state where they don't have capital punishment. Gosh! I wish I'd thought of that before she got away. It would have taken a lot of wind out of her sails, wouldn't it?"

Mr. Gooch put a dampener on this. "I don't see how that would help any if a mob took him out of jail and lynched him. They say lynching is getting worse all the time in this part of the country."

Whereupon Mr. Sikes arose and said something under his breath, adding an instant later:

"Don't let me hear anything about Solomon being so dodgasted wise. Look at all the brother-in-laws he must have taken unto himself—and with his eyes open, too."

CHAPTER V

OLIVER IS FOUND TO HAVE A TEMPER

Ten years pass. The time has come when Oliver October Baxter is to be told what is in store for him if he does not mend his ways. For, be it here recorded, Oliver not only possesses a quick temper but a surprisingly sanguinary way of making it felt. He is a rugged, freckle-faced youngster with curly brown hair, a pair of stout legs, and a couple of hard little fists. It is with these hard little fists that he makes his temper felt. Ordinarily he retires behind a barn or down into the grove back of the school-house to settle his quarrels, not through any sense of delicacy but because both he and his adversary of the moment realize that if they are caught at it the pride of victory or the gloom of defeat would soon be forgotten in the sound thrashings administered by teacher or parent, justice monstrously untempered by mercy.

But there came a day when Oliver's valor got the better of his discretion, and, sad to relate, Joseph Sikes and Silas Link took that very day to accompany each other to the north end of town, where, just beyond the school-house, was situated the home of a vacillating Republican who had made up his mind to vote the Democratic ticket at the coming county election. They were on their way, as a committee of two, to convince him that he couldn't commit a crime like that and still go on enjoying the respect, the confidence, and to some extent, the credit, that had been his up to that time.

They arrived at the school-house just in time to witness a fierce but bloodless fight between two panting, clawing youngsters. It was taking place in the schoolyard, in plain view of passers-by, and was being relished by a score or more of pupils of both sexes.

Now, Mr. Sikes was a man who enjoyed a good fight. He was getting to the age where he had to think twice and study his adversary cautiously before engaging in one himself, for, notwithstanding his strength and his pugnacity, he was not the man he used to be—witness: the awful beating he sustained in his fifty-second year at the hands of Joe Fox, the twenty-one year old shortstop on the Rumley base ball team. It was he, therefore, who stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and gleefully yelled "sic-em" to the battling youngsters.

Mr. Link, nothing loth, turned back to join him at the fence. The broad grins suddenly froze on their faces. The surge of battle caused the ring of spectators to open up a little, exposing the combatants to plain view from the excellent vantage point held by the Messrs. Sikes and Link. They recognized Oliver October—but never had they seen him look like this! His chubby face was white and set, his teeth were bared, his eyes were blazing. He was the embodiment of fury. And he was fighting like a demon!

"Gosh!" fell from the lips of Joseph Sikes, and his cigar would have done likewise had it not been so deeply inserted.

"It's—it's little Oliver!" gasped Silas Link, gripping the top board of the fence.

"Fi-fighting!" muttered Mr. Sikes, aghast.

"Like a wildcat," groaned Mr. Link.

"Why, he's a reg'lar little devil."

"Looks as if he'd like to kill that boy of Sam Parr's. We got to stop 'em, Joe—Hey, there! You boys quit that! Hear what I say? Quit it this—"

Suddenly there was a cry of "teacher," and then a wild scattering of spectators. The schoolmaster, Mr. Elwell, was advancing upon the belligerents. The Parr boy, in no fear of Oliver, was stricken by the most abject terror in the presence of an on-rushing doom, for well he knew the sting of Mr. Elwell's hand when punitively applied to the seat of his breeches whilst he reposed in ungainly disorder across the pedagogic knee. It was the Parr boy's luck to be facing the teacher as he swooped down upon them. He took advantage of that gracious bit of luck, and, turning tail, sped swiftly away, leaving the astonished Oliver to his fate.

A firm hand fell upon the Baxter boy's shoulder and closed in a grip that brought a stifled yelp from the lips of the unvanquished warrior. Then something happened that drew a simultaneous groan of dismay from the elderly onlookers. Oliver October, still in a state of baffled fury and wriggling in the clutch of the common enemy of all schoolboys, delivered a vicious kick at an Elwell shin. So faultless was his aim that Mr. Elwell's grunt of pain was loud enough to be heard by timid schoolgirls some twenty yards away—and as it was an articulate grunt those who heard it plainly were shocked, as good little girls ought to be. Oliver, blubbering with rage, kicked again and again, efforts rendered futile by the length of the teacher's arm.

A little girl of six, in a brown coat and a red tam o' shanter, stood near by, shrieking with terror. She alone of all the scholars had failed to leave the field of battle.

The two lifelong friends of the Baxter family looked at each other. Speech was unnecessary. Their expressions spoke plainer than words. They faced calamity—desolating calamity. Oliver October had a temper, and it was ungovernable! He was ferocious! He was a regular little devil! They watched the teacher as he yanked the struggling lad across the yard and into the school-house, and a great dread took possession of their souls.

Said Mr. Sikes: "Don't you think we'd better go in there and rescue him while there's time to—"

"Not a bit of it," protested Mr. Link. "Let him take his medicine."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Oliver October. Who did you think I was talking about?"

"Arthur Elwell, of course. That boy's got a knife. I gave it to him last Christmas—darn my fool soul! Chances are he'll stick it into Arthur—"

"Listen!" hissed Mr. Link. A series of sharp, staccato howls in the shrill voice of a boy came from the interior of the school-house. "That don't sound much like Oliver was sticking a knife into anybody, does it?"

"But the way he kicked Arthur on the shin," began Mr. Sikes forcibly. "Why, that boy's got murder in his heart, Silas. And the way he fought that Parr boy. Gee whiz! He's got a lot of hell in him and it's just beginning to break loose. I tell you, Silas, that gypsy was right. No use trying to laugh it off. Now maybe you and Reverend Sage will pay some attention to me. I've been saying for two or three years we ought to take that boy in hand and train him to keep—"

"Why, darn it, ain't we been training him since he first began to walk? Ain't we been making him go to Sunday-school, and—"

"Yes, but we never told him to fight or kick his teacher, did we?"

"Certainly *not*."

"Well, he's doing it, ain't he? Going to Sunday-school ain't helped him a damn' bit. I said it wouldn't. It's been a waste of money, that's what it's been."

"Waste of—how do you make that out? Sunday-school's free, ain't it?"

"Every Sunday for the last five years," proceeded Mr. Sikes, "I've been giving that boy a nickel to put in the collection box—and here he is, behaving as bad as any boy in town. I—Gee whiz! Listen to him yell! Say, we'd ought to go in there and put a stop to that dodgasted idiot. He'll kill the poor boy."

The wails indoors ceased abruptly, but, to the astonishment of the highly exercised pair, they were taken up almost directly under their noses. That is to say, their attention was drawn for the first time to the little six-year-old girl, whose heart-rending squeals were now piercing the silence that followed the awful uproar in which Oliver October had been taking part.

"Hello!" cried Mr. Sikes. "What are *you* crying about, Janie?"

"You ain't been spanked," supplemented Mr. Link. He reached over the fence and put his hands under the arms of the weeping child. Lifting her over, he held her close to his expansive breast. She buried her face on his shoulder and sobbed. "There, there, now," he whispered soothingly. "Your Uncle Silas won't let anybody hurt you."

"Your Uncle Joe will just everlastingly slaughter anybody that touches you," added Mr. Sikes fiercely.

They waited, their eyes fixed on the school-house door. Presently they were rewarded. A small figure, with tousled hair and a face screwed up into a mask of pain and mortification, came slinking down the steps—a thoroughly chastened gladiator who sniffled and was without glory. His streaming eyes swept the yard and took in the staring group of pupils clustered at the upper corner; and then the two "Uncles" at the fence. He stopped short in his tracks—but only for an instant. His degradation was complete. With an explosive sob, wrenched from his very soul, he whirled and darted around the corner of the building and disappeared from view.

Mr. Link, bearing the sobbing Jane in his arms, turned and started back in the direction from which he had come, his companion trailing close behind. They had changed their minds about seeing the recalcitrant Republican. As they strode swiftly away they heard the stern voice of the schoolmaster calling out:

"Where is Sammy Parr?"

But Sammy was far, far away, streaking it for home; a chorus of treble voices answered for him:

"He ain't here, teacher."

Now, the incident just related may appear to be of very small consequence as viewed from the standpoint of the disinterested spectator—who, it so happens, must be the reader of this narrative. As a matter of fact, it has a great deal to do with the history of Oliver October Baxter. It was that gallant afternoon's engagement between the supposedly pacific Oliver and his bosom friend, Sammy Parr, that aroused the town as nothing else had stirred it in years. Certainly nothing had stirred it in quite the same way.

For nearly ten years every adult citizen of Rumley had looked upon Oliver October as a sort of public liability. Within twenty-four hours after it was uttered on that fierce October night, the sinister prophecy of the gypsy queen was known from one end of the town to the other, and while many scoffed and made light of it, not one was there among them who felt confident that Oliver would be absolutely safe until he had passed his thirtieth birthday. And now, after ten years of complacent trust in Oliver October, the town was to discover that he had an outlandish temper and a decided inclination to commit murder—in a small way, to be sure, but none the less instinctive.

If Oliver and Sammy had retired—as was the custom—to some secluded battlefield, no doubt the crisis would have been delayed. But inasmuch as Sammy had taken it into his head to torment little Jane Sage in so public a place as the playground it was only natural that her champion should offer battle on the spot. Moreover, he scorned Sammy's invitation to "come on down back of the warehouse," and likewise was indifferent to the warnings of peacemakers who urged them not to fight until they were safely out of all danger of being interfered with by the teacher. It is probable—aye, more than that, it is absolutely certain—that young Oliver wished to "lick" the offender in the presence of the offended, and that would have been quite out of the question had they repaired to some familiar jousting-ground. At any rate, he valiantly pitched into Sammy and was getting the better of him under the very eyes of his "ladye faire" when the not unexpected catastrophe occurred.

Juvenile Rumley knew him far better than its seniors. It had seen him fight on more than one occasion—which was more than grown-up Rumley had seen or even suspected—but so loyal is youth that not a word of his or any other boy's fistic exploits ever reached the ears of the blissfully ignorant.

Messrs. Sikes and Link, having abandoned their original mission, were bent upon a new one. They were filled with a deep concern, and spoke but few words to each other in the course of the half-mile walk to the home of

the Reverend Herbert Sage. Their reticence may have been due to the presence of little Jane Sage, who walked between them; or, it may have been due to the seriousness of their reflections. The statement that Jane walked between them is not an accurate one. It is true that Mr. Sikes held one of her hands while Mr. Link held the other, but her legs were short and theirs were long, and so there were times when her feet failed to touch the ground at all, or, in touching it, were sadly without sustained purpose.

Shortly before seven o'clock that evening, Oliver October, fearing the worst, remarked three well-known figures coming up the path to the Baxter house. He had just finished his supper and was on the point of departing for the home of Sammy Parr down the road for a few minutes' play before darkness fell. Seeing the three visitors and sensing the nature of their descent upon the home of his father, he stole out the back way, and, even as a dog retreats with his tail between his legs, made tracks toward the barn and its friendly hayloft. Something told him that Sammy's parents already had received a call from the dread Committee of Three and perhaps were even now making it hot for Sammy—in which case that bosom friend of his would be in no mood for play.

"Where's Oliver October?" inquired Mr. Sikes of Mr. Baxter, who opened the door to admit his callers.

Mr. Baxter is scrawnier than he was at forty-five, which is saying something that challenges the credulity. He is still strong, and active, and wiry, but he is a thing of knobs and joints and wrinkles. The passing years seem deliberately to have neglected the rest of his person in a shameless endeavor to develop for him a prize Adam's apple; it has become quite a fascinating though bewildering product, scarce what you would call an adornment and yet not without its own peculiar charm.

It is a shifting, unstable hump that appears to have no definite place of lodgment; no sooner does it settle into a momentary state of repose than something comes up—or down—to disturb its serenity and, in a charmed sort of way, you watch it resume its spasmodic titillations. It grips you. You can't help wondering what it is going to do next. And as it happens to be placed in the scrawniest part of Mr. Baxter's person—his neck—it is always visible. He makes a practice of removing his collar the instant he reaches home of an evening, a provision that affords great relief not only to himself but also to the vagrant protuberance.

Which accounts for his being quite collarless when he faced his three visitors. He blinked at them uneasily, for their faces were long and joyless.

"He was here a minute ago," he replied. "Why?"

"Before we proceed any farther, Brother Baxter," announced the Reverend Sage, "I wish to state that I do not agree with our friends here."

"You never do agree with us," said Mr. Link, but without a trace of resentment.

"I wouldn't go quite so far as that if I were you, Silas," protested the minister affably. "It is only in the case of Oliver October that I disagree with you. We heartily agree on almost everything else, I am sure."

"But the time has come when we got to agree about Oliver October," declared Mr. Sikes dictatorially. "I said it would come, and here it is. I only hope we ain't too late. It seems to be the style not to pay a damn' bit of attention to anything I say nowadays. It's a hell of a—"

"My dear Brother Sikes," broke in the parson, lifting his eyebrows.

Joseph Sikes swallowed hard before speaking again. "It ain't always my fault when I cuss and blaspheme like this," he muttered defensively.

"The thing is," began Mr. Link, compressing his lips and squinting earnestly; "what is the best way to go about it?"

"Go about what?" demanded the mystified Mr. Baxter.

"Have you licked him yet?" inquired Sikes darkly.

"Licked who?"

"Oliver October."

"Not in the last three years. I promised I wouldn't."

"Do you mean to tell me, Ollie Baxter, that you don't know what that boy's been up to to-day?"

Oliver's parent regarded Mr. Sikes coldly. "Yes, I *do* know," he snapped.

"Well, what *has* he been up to, if you know so much about it?"

"None of your derned business. I'm not obliged to consult you or anybody—"

"Calm yourself, Brother Baxter," admonished the parson gently. "As I was saying before, I do not agree with Joe and Silas. They are making a mountain out of a mole hill. The boy is all right. He is high-spirited, he is mischievous—as all boys are if they're any good at all—and he is not a coward. Of course, it would be most reprehensible—er—and quite

unpardonable in me if I were to say that I approve of fighting, but when I look back upon my own boyhood and recall the—er—rather barbarous joy I took in bloodying some other boy's nose, I—ahem!—well, I believe I can understand why Oliver October preferred to stand up and fight rather than run away. Ahem! Yes, in spite of my calling, I think I can understand that in any real boy."

Mr. Baxter's face lengthened. "Oh, Lordy! Has Oliver been fighting?"

"Like a wildcat," said Mr. Sikes sententiously. "Everybody in town knows about it. Everybody but you, I mean."

The father groaned. "I thought he looked as if he'd done something he'd oughtn't—Oh, for goodness' sake, don't tell me he used a knife or—"

"Nothing but his fists, my dear Baxter—from all reports. I did not witness the—"

"How about the hide he peeled off of Arthur Elwell's shin?" demanded Mr. Sikes. "He didn't do that with his fists, did he? Why, I've knowed blood poisoning to set in on a feller's shin bone from a scratch you couldn't hardly see. It's almost sure to happen if you wear green socks like Arthur does. The dye or something gets into the—"

"Jeemes's River! Has that fool boy been trying to lick Arthur Elwell?" gasped Mr. Baxter, blinking rapidly. "Ain't he got any more sense than to tackle a six-foot man like—"

"It seems that Oliver, in his rage, kicked Mr. Elwell after he had separated—er—that is, when he took him in hand for fighting in the playground after school," said Mr. Sage. "That is something that frequently happens to peacemakers, Joseph."

"The thing is," said Mr. Link, "we got to do something about Oliver October's temper. We got to make him realize the awfulness of being hung by the neck—"

"Justly or unjustly," put in Mr. Sikes.

"Absolutely," accepted Mr. Link. "The time has come when we got to head that boy into the right path by telling him what the gypsy woman said."

"I must repeat—as I have repeated times without end—that I think it would be the height of cruelty to tell the child any of that nonsense," protested Mr. Sage, rather vigorously for him. "Why, when I think of little Oliver lying awake nights picturing himself on the gallows—"

"It's our duty to warn him," insisted Sikes. "It's our duty by Ollie here and poor Mary to see that that boy has everything done for him that can be done in the way of—er—advice. The first thing we got to do, now that he's old enough to understand—and, mind you, I claim he was old enough three or four years ago—is to make him control his temper. We got to bring him up so's nobody on earth can truthfully say he's got a mean and cruel and bloodthirsty nature. So when his trial comes up there'll be plenty of witnesses to testify that he wouldn't kill a fly, much less a man. But, by criminy, if he goes on kicking school-teachers and fighting like a bull dog, he'll get such a reputation that he won't have a ghost of a chance when it comes to testifying as regards to his character."

"Let's go inside," said Oliver's father, wiping a little moisture from his brow.

He led the way into the sitting-room where a lamp was burning above the center table—a brassy, ornate lamp suspended from the ceiling over a glossy mahogany table. The former was a Christmas present from Oliver to his wife and the latter was a present from Mary to her husband. All about the refurbished room were to be seen other gifts from Oliver to Mary, and Mary to Oliver—such as the comparatively new ingrain carpet; a larger and more generous base-burner stove with very bright nickel trimmings and a towering "dome"; a three-year old wall-paper in which poppies and humming-birds abounded; a "Morris" chair of the mission type; a hard, high-backed leather couch; two rocking-chairs, very comfortable but of peripatetic habits; a new eight-day clock; several framed "engravings" of a patriotic or sentimental character; a sectional book case containing sets of Dickens, Thackeray and Charles Lever (two dollars a month until paid for); chintz window curtains; and, last but not least, a wall-telephone. (Party J, ring 4.)

These were but a few of the symbols of prosperity that marked the progress of the Baxters during the decade. The same mellowing influence of a well-directed opulence prevailed throughout the house. For one thing, a separate dining-room had been constructed off the sitting-room; the porch and the house had undergone repairs and painting; the gravel walk was replaced by one of soft red brick, and the fences were in order. The only thing about the place that had not improved with the times and the conditions was Oliver Baxter himself. He, alas, could not be re-upholstered; he could not be painted or repaired; moreover, he could not be stored away in the attic with all the other things belonging to another day.

“It’s more cheerful in here,” explained Mr. Baxter, in a most cheerless voice. “Sit down. Had I better call Oliver in now—or wait a while?”

His three visitors solemnly seated themselves.

“Better wait a few minutes,” advised Mr. Link.

“I—I kind of hate to whip him,” said Mr. Baxter forlornly. “He’s a good little boy, and I—I promised his mother I’d never whip him unless I actually caught him doing something bad.”

“Who said you had to whip him?” demanded Mr. Link.

“I wouldn’t let you whip him, even if you wanted to,” stated Mr. Sikes flatly. “All I want is for us to talk to him about—well, about his future.”

“It has just occurred to me that it might be advisable for me to find Oliver and have a talk with him privately before we drag him before this—er—before his executioners,” said Mr. Sage, with kindly irony. “I could explain gently and—”

“I know just what you’d do, Parson,” broke in Mr. Sikes. “You’d explain things to him by telling him there was a couple of blamed old fools in here making up a story he oughtn’t to pay any attention to—just be polite and say ‘Yes, sir’ and ‘No, sir’ and act like a little gentleman no matter what we say, but not to worry, because there ain’t a damn’ thing to worry about.”

“I dare say you are right,” sighed the kind-hearted minister. “My little girl, it appears, was the cause of this fight, Brother Baxter. I regret to say that Jane—ah—sort of egged him on. It does not seem to me to be quite just that Oliver should be penalized for his—shall we say an act of chivalry? Naturally I am inclined to favor the boy. No doubt if Jane had refrained from—”

“That ain’t the point,” interrupted Mr. Link. “The thing is, did he lose his temper or did he not—and if so, is it safe to let him go on losing it like that? You can’t tell what it will lead to.”

“What I want to know,” broke in Mr. Baxter, “is who he’s been fighting with.”

“Sammy Parr,” replied the three visitors.

“Sammy Parr? Why, doggone it, it ain’t more than an hour ago they were playing hopscotch out in my barn lot. I never saw two boys more friendly and happy than they were.”

"That's the worst of it," said Mr. Link solemnly: "It goes to prove that when Oliver gets mad he don't know what he's doing. It's these violent, ungovernable tempers that raises thunder, Ollie. The kind that flares up like a powder explosion, does a lot of damage, and then dies down like a breeze. Fighting fit to kill one minute, smiling the next. They're the worst kind."

It was decided by Messrs. Sikes and Link, over the objections of Mr. Sage, to have Oliver October up before the tribunal forthwith. The boy's father apparently had no voice in the matter.

"Of course, I'll admit he's got a temper," said the latter, as he arose to go in search of his son. "I don't know where he gets it from. Mary usually had her own way, but it wasn't because she insisted on having it. And she never got mad if I opposed her. She just laughed and went ahead and did things her way. In that way we always got along without a sign of a quarrel. As for me, I haven't got any more of a temper than a sheep has. He don't get it from either of us. My grandfather had an uncle that he used to talk a good deal about—a feller that would fight at the drop of the hat—but he always claimed he did it for fun and because he enjoyed lickin' somebody every once in awhile. Oliver seems to take after me in a good many ways, and he's like his Ma in others. He's got my freckles and nose and when he grows up I guess maybe he'll have my hair, but he's got Mary's eyes and ears and mouth and his legs are more like hers—ha! ha!—I mean they ain't skinny and crooked like mine—er—Well, I guess I'll go out and see if I can find him."

With that, he dashed hurriedly from the room. Presently they heard him out in the yard calling Oliver's name. That Oliver did not respond at once was obvious. The shout was repeated several times, growing fainter as the search took Mr. Baxter around to the back of the house and into the region of the barn and outbuildings.

"Everything that gypsy woman said has come true up to date," announced Mr. Sikes, after silence had reigned for many minutes in the sitting-room. "In the first place, she said he was going to look like his pa—and he does. He's an improvement on big Ollie, I'll admit—a big improvement—but just the same he's a lot like him. Then she said he'd always be at the head of his class and as bright as a dollar, didn't she? Well, *that's* come true, ain't it?"

Here he paused, reluctant to go on with his justification of the gypsy's prophecy. He looked at Mr. Link, who at once accepted the unspoken

challenge by assuming the funereal air that always marked his translation from livery-man to undertaker.

"Yes," said Silas, his gaze lifted toward the ceiling, "and we must not forget that his beloved mother died before he was ten years old."

"True," mused the minister, nodding his head slowly. "Doubly unfortunate was that dear woman's death. If God in his wisdom had seen fit to spare her for a few days longer all this nonsense about the gypsy woman's prophecy would be—"

"Sh! Here they come," cautioned Silas, as steps were heard on the front porch.

"I hope Serepty Grimes don't happen to drop in," said Mr. Sikes uneasily.

"She won't," vouchsafed Mr. Link. "I happen to know that Ed Tucker's wife ain't expected to live till morning."

"You don't say so! I heard she was better to-day."

"False alarm," said the undertaker, thoughtlessly.

Mr. Baxter marshaled his son into the room on the tail of this remark, and ordered him to take off his hat—a command instantly followed by another that took him back to the door mat, where he sullenly performed a forgotten obligation.

And so it came to pass on this mild September evening, that young Oliver October learned what was in store for him if his "fortune" came true.

He sat very still and wide-eyed in the depths of the Morris chair—a distinction conferred upon him by his compassionate elders—his sturdy black-hosed legs sticking straight out before him, his grimy hands stuck—for reasons of shame—into his already crowded trouser pockets. His gray eyes, from which the cloud of obstinacy soon disappeared, went quickly from speaker to speaker as the grewsome story of that remote October night was unfolded in varying degrees of lucidity by the giants who towered over him. He was a very small boy and they were very big and very, very old monsters. And they were telling him all this, they said, because they loved him and were going to do everything they could to keep him from being hung some day! There wasn't anything they wouldn't do! But a great deal depended on him. That was the thing, repeated Mr. Link, over and over again. He must realize that a great deal depended on him.

First of all, it was imperative that he should never, never allow his temper to get the better of him; he must never, never get mad at anybody or anything; he must never get into fights; no matter what the provocation, he must not get into fights; if there was no other way, he must play with the little girls and avoid the boys—at least, until the little girls grew up and were too big for him to play with.

He revealed a most commendable temper when Mr. Link stipulated that he should play with the little girls.

"I won't play with the girls," he cried hotly. "I hate 'em. I'll kill 'em if they try to play with me."

"My, my!" exclaimed Mr. Link in dismay.

"Tut-tut!" said Mr. Sikes reproachfully.

"Oliver!" cautioned his father, speaking for the first time since the ordeal began.

"Well, I won't play with girls," repeated Oliver. "You bet I won't. I hate 'em."

"I guess there's no reason why you can't play with the boys," compromised Mr. Link, "provided you'll only remember that you mustn't fight with 'em."

"Well, I got to fight with 'em if they fight with me, don't I?" cried Oliver.

"Spoken like a man," said the minister, patting him on the shoulder.

"Well, I'll be doggoned!" gasped Mr. Sikes, staring in disgust at the speaker. "And you a minister of the gospel!"

"We must not make a coward of Oliver," said the other, a trifle warmly.

"That's right," said Oliver's father. "Mary wouldn't have liked to see a son of hers grow up to be a—a feller who wouldn't stand up for his rights. And neither would I. What's more, Joe Sikes, you're a fine one to talk. You've had more fights than anybody in—"

"The thing is," broke in Mr. Link, "if Oliver October can fight without losing his temper, I'll not say a word. Do you think you can, my lad?"

"What's the use of fighting if you ain't mad?" reasoned Oliver October. "It would be just like wrassling."

"Now, see here, Oliver," spoke up Mr. Sikes severely, "all we ask of you is to grow up to be a good, kind, peaceful man like your Pa here. He's getting along towards sixty years of age, and I don't know as he ever had a fight in his life. If he ever did, he probably wished he hadn't. Your Pa is a respected, upright citizen of this here town, and I want to see you foller in his footsteps. And what's more, your Pa ain't a coward. Not much! He's as brave as I am—yes, siree, he's a *braver* man than I am. I was always going around picking up fights, just because I was big and strong and didn't have any sense. That's it. I didn't have the sense that God gives a hickory-nut. Your Pa had a lot of sense. He's got it yet. And why? I'll tell you why, Oliver. He saw right smack in the beginning that no matter how good a fighter you are when you're young, it ain't going to do you any good when you're old—because when you're old nobody gives a *dern* how good a fighter you were when you were young. They just say you used to be a tough customer—and sort of shoulder you out of the way. But if you've got a reputation like your Pa's—for common sense, fair-dealing, kindness, good-nature and—and—(with a conciliatory glance at Mr. Sage)—and religion, why—er—why, you're all right. Understand? But, on the other hand, if, as you say, you've got to fight in case somebody picks on you, why, you ought to have some lessons in boxing. I've been thinking it over. If you'd like for me to do it, I'll show you a lot about boxing. Boxing lessons will prove to you how important it is to keep your temper. The minute a boxer loses his temper and gets mad, he's going to get licked. That's as sure as shooting. You never saw a prizefighter in your life that got mad when he was in the ring. If you'll come around to the feed yard after school to-morrow, I'll learn you how to—"

"About what time, Uncle Joe?" broke in Oliver eagerly, his face lighting up.

CHAPTER VI

A PASTOR PROMISES AID

Four mature throats were simultaneously cleared, and Mr. Sage, being a very unusual sort of minister, abruptly put his hand over his mouth—not quite soon enough, however, to smother a spasmodic chuckle.

Notwithstanding this and other diverting passages, Master Oliver was finally made to realize the vastness of the dark and terrifying shadow that hung over him. He listened to the pronouncement of his own doom, and his warm little heart was beating fast and hard in an ice-cold body that trembled with awe. He suffered his "uncles" to pat him on the shoulder and say they would "stand by" him through thick and thin, and his lip quivered with something far removed from gratitude. He sat up long past his bed-time, and his eyes were bright and shining where ordinarily they would have been dull and heavy.

At last the three hangmen arose to depart. They had frightened the poor boy out of his boots, and now, well-satisfied with their work, were going home to sleep the sleep of the just and beneficent whilst he was doomed to a shivery night in which the gallows they had erected for him was to stand out as if it were real and not a thing of the imagination.

"And, now, Oliver," said Mr. Sikes consolingly, "you needn't be afraid of the fortune coming true, because we're going to see that it don't. We're going to watch over you, and tend you, and guide you, and some day we'll all sit around and laugh ourselves sick over what that infernal lying gypsy woman said. So don't you worry. Me and your Uncle Silas and Mr. Sage here are going to make it our business to see that you grow up to be a fine, decent, absolutely model young man, and 'long about 1920 or thereabouts we'll have the doggonedest celebration you ever heard of. We'll paint the town—"

"How old will I be then?" piped up Oliver wistfully.

"You'll be thirty and over," announced Mr. Sikes.

"And how old will you and Uncle Silas be?"

"About the same age as your Pa—couple of years' difference, maybe, one way or the other."

“How old will that be?”

Mr. Link, who was quick at figures, replied, but with a most singular hush in his usually jovial voice.

“Why—er—I’ll be seventy-eight, your Pa will be seventy-five, and your Uncle Joe here will be—you’ll be eighty, Joe. By jiminy, I wonder if—”

“I didn’t know anybody ever lived to be as old as that,” said Oliver, so earnestly that three of his listeners frowned. “Except Methusalum. Maybe you’ll all be dead and buried ’fore I’m thirty so what’s going to become of me then?”

“Why—er—we don’t intend to be dead for a long, long time,” explained Mr. Sikes. “I’m figuring on living to be a hundred, and so’s your pa and Uncle Silas. Don’t you worry about us, sonny. We’ll be hanging—I mean, we’ll be moseying around this here town for forty or fifty years longer, sure as you’re alive. Yes, sirree.”

“What an awful thing it would be,” groaned Oliver’s father, “if all three of us was to up and die inside the next eight or ten—”

“If there’s an epidemic like that,” interrupted Mr. Link, scowling at the tactless Mr. Baxter, “it’ll probably take Oliver off too, so don’t be foolish.”

Mr. Sage spoke up, dryly. “It will be quite all right for you to die, gentlemen, whenever the good Lord thinks it most convenient. You seem to forget that I am one of Oliver October’s self-appointed guardians. Permit me to remind you that I will still be a mere youth of sixty when he reaches the age of thirty. So you need not feel the slightest compunction or hesitancy about dying.”

He was stared at very hard by two of his listeners.

“I wish my Ma was here,” said Oliver October, his lip trembling. Despite the sincere if voluble protestations of the three visitors, he still felt miserably in need of a friend and comforter. He could not conceive of his father taking him in his arms and holding him tight; there wasn’t anything soft and warm and cushiony about his father; only his mother could whisper and croon in his ear and snuggle him up close when he was sick or frightened, and she was gone.

“Amen to that,” said Mr. Sage, fervently.

“Amen!” repeated Mr. Link in his most professional voice.

Mr. Sikes coughed uncomfortably and then put on his hat.

"Well, good night," said he. "Sleep tight, sonny."

"Say 'thank you' to your Uncle Joe, Oliver," said Mr. Baxter huskily, and then, without rime or reason, gave vent to his nervous cackle.

"Thank you, Uncle Joe," muttered Oliver.

Mr. Sage laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Do you say your prayers every night, Oliver?"

"Yes, sir—I do."

"Well—er—if Brother Baxter doesn't mind and if you gentlemen will excuse me, I think I will go upstairs with Oliver and—and listen to his prayer."

A little later on, the tall, spare pastor sat on the side of young Oliver's trundle bed in the room across the hall from old Oliver's and next to the one in which Annie Sharp, the hired girl, was already sound asleep. The boy had murmured his "Now I lay me" and, for good measure, the Lord's Prayer. Mr. Sage leaned over and, lowering his voice, said—but not until he had satisfied himself that no one was listening outside the door:

"You believe I am a good man, don't you, Oliver—a very good man?"

"Yes, sir. You're a preacher. You got to be good."

"Ahem! Quite so. You don't believe I could tell a lie, do you?"

"No, sir."

"Well, now I am going to tell you something and I want you to believe it. Nobody on this earth can foretell the future. Nobody knows what is going to happen to-morrow, much less what is going to happen years away. It isn't possible. God does not give any person that miraculous power. Our Lord Jesus Christ could perform miracles, but he was the only one who could do so. Do you think that God would give to all the thieving gypsies in the world the same divine power that he gave to his only Son, the Savior? No! Now, listen. There is not a word of truth in what that old gypsy woman said—not one word, Oliver. You can believe me, you can trust me. I am God's minister, and I am telling you to pay no attention to anything Mr. Sikes and Mr. Link said to you to-night. If God would only allow me to do so, I would tell you that they are a pair of silly old fools—but that wouldn't be kind, so I will not say it. You need not be afraid. All that talk about your being hung some day is poppycock—pure poppycock. Don't you believe a word of it. I came upstairs with you just for the purpose of telling you this—not really to hear your prayers. Now don't you feel better?"

“But you just said, Uncle Herbert, that nobody could see ahead. How do you know I won’t be—be hung?”

“I am not saying that, my lad. I am merely telling you that the gypsy woman did not have the power to see ahead. There is no such thing as true fortune-telling. She claimed to read the stars. Well, do you suppose that all those millions and millions of stars—any one of them much greater than the earth—are interested in little bits of things like you and me? No, siree, Oliver. They don’t even know we exist. That old gypsy was just lying. They all do. They take your money and then they go away and laugh at you for being such a goose. So you need not worry at all about what you were told to-night. And now I am going to say something to you that will surprise you. It is wrong for me, a minister of the gospel, to tell you this, but I love fighting Christians just as much as I love praying Christians. I do not mean that a man should go about looking for fights. That would be very, very wrong. Wouldn’t it?” He asked the question abruptly.

“Yes, sir,” said Oliver. “It would.”

“You must keep out of fights whenever you can, but if the time comes when you *must* fight—do it as well as you know how and pray about it afterwards. When your enemy smites you, turn the other cheek like a good Christian boy—but do not let him hit your other cheek if you can help it. Defend yourself. Put up your props, as your Uncle Joe says, and sail into him. You will thus be turning the other cheek, but it does not mean that he may smite it without resistance on your part. The Bible doesn’t seem to be very clear on that point, so I am taking the liberty of telling you just what I think *ought* to be done when an enemy besets you with his fists. You must not fight if you can help it, Oliver. A soft answer turneth away wrath. Sometimes. When I was your age, I had a good many fights—and you see what I am to-day. A minister of the gospel. If I had an enemy to-day and he was to set upon me, I should defend myself to the best of my strength and ability. Your Uncle Joe and your Uncle Silas are right, however, in counseling you to avoid conflict. No good ever comes of it. As you grow older you will acquire wisdom, and wisdom is a very great thing, Oliver. A wise man does not go about seeking for trouble. He tries to avoid it. And so will you when you are older. But just at present you are no wiser than other boys of your age. You were very foolish to fight with Sammy to-day because Jane egged you on. It is most commendable, of course, to protect a lady in distress. But Jane was not in distress. She did not need protection. Sometimes a woman—But never mind. You understand what I mean, don’t you, Oliver?”

"No, sir," said the truthful Oliver.

"Well, what I want you to do, Oliver, is to go on leading a—er—regular boy's life. Do the things that are right and square, be honest and fearless—and no harm will ever come to you. Now, turn over and go to sleep, there's a good boy. I will put out the light for you. Don't lie awake worrying about things—because there is nothing to worry about. Good night, Oliver. I have a very great affection for you, my lad, and, so long as God lets me live, I will always help you when—er—evil besets you. As it did to-night."

He smiled dryly, perhaps a little guiltily, as he turned away and lowered the wick in the lamp that stood on the table near by.

"Don't blow it out yet, please," pleaded Oliver October. "I want to ast you a question."

"Go ahead, my lad. What is it?" said the man, peering over the lamp chimney, at the boy huddled up in the bed.

"If you was me, would you take boxing lessons from Uncle Joe?"

Mr. Sage considered, weighing his words. A little wave of color spread over his pale, ascetic face, and a queer light gleamed in his kindly eye.

"No, I wouldn't," he answered after a moment. Then he blew out the light. Instead of departing, he strode over and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I doubt very much if Joe Sikes is a scientific boxer. He strikes me as a rather rough and tumble sort of fellow. You wouldn't learn much from him, I'm afraid. But I'll tell you what I will do. I will give you a—er—a few instructions myself, if you will come over to the house, say once a week—secretly, you understand. You must never tell anybody that I am—er—giving you lessons in the manly art of self-defense. It will have to be a very dark secret between us, Oliver. For the present, at any rate."

He was glad that he had blown out the light. Somehow he knew that the small boy's eyes were upon him, and that they were filled with the sort of amazement that makes one most uncomfortable. This was proved by the very significant fact that Oliver did not speak. After a moment Mr. Sage went on, a little hurriedly:

"You see, Oliver, when I was in college—that was before I went to the Theological Institute, you know—I went in for the various sports and games. I was on the football team and the baseball team, and so forth. Quite a number of us took up boxing. It is very fine exercise for both the body and the mind. Yes, I will be happy to teach you a few of the tricks of the—er—sport. Of course, I have not boxed since I became a minister, but I—er—I

dare say I haven't forgotten how to feint and block and sidestep and—ahem! Yes, yes—come and see me to-morrow and we will talk it over."

As he slowly descended the stairs, he consoled himself with the thought that he had given the poor lad something besides the gallows to think about.

The three old men were waiting for him on the porch, and none too amiably it would appear, judging by the glum silence that greeted him as he joined them. Mr. Link and Mr. Sikes spoke a gruff "good night" to Baxter and started off toward the gate at the foot of the slope. The minister paused at the top of the steps to shake hands with Oliver October's harassed parent.

"Thank you for coming over and helping straighten things out," said Mr. Baxter. Then he proceeded to commit himself and his two cronies by adding: "Have you heard anything from Josephine lately?"

Now that was the one question that the people of Rumley religiously and resolutely refrained from asking Mr. Sage. They persistently asked it of each other—in an obviously modified form—and they did not hesitate to bother the postmaster from time to time with inquiries; but they never asked it of Josephine's husband. It was a very delicate matter.

Mrs. Sage, in the sixth year of her married life—her baby was then two years old—surrendered to her ambition. She went on the stage.

And so, it is no wonder that people hesitated about asking Mr. Sage how she was getting along; to most of them it was almost the same as inquiring if he knew how she was getting along in hell.

Besides, it was hard to ask questions of a man whose eyes were dark with unhappiness and whose face was drawn and sad and always wistful.

For nearly four years that very question had been on the tip of Mr. Baxter's tongue, struggling for release. He had always succeeded in holding it back. And now, before he knew what he was about, he let go and out it came. He was petrified.

"Not lately," said Mr. Sage, quietly.

Whereupon, for no reason at all, Mr. Baxter cackled inanely.

CHAPTER VII

THE MINISTER'S WIFE

Rumley had not stood still during the decade. It was the proud boast of its most enterprising citizen, Silas Link, that it had done a great deal better than Chicago: it had tripled its population. And, he proclaimed, all "she" had to do was to keep on tripling her population every ten years and "she" would be a city of nearly half a million souls in 1950. It was all very simple, he explained. All you had to do was to multiply fifteen hundred (the approximate population in 1900), by three and you would have forty-five hundred in 1910.

"Work it out yourself," he was wont to say, "if you don't believe me. If we keep on multiplying we'll have 364,500 population fifty years from now."

The prize pupil in the South Rumley school, Freddy Chuck, aged thirteen, went even further than Mr. Link in his calculations. He carried the matter up to the year 2000 and proved conclusively that if the ratio could be maintained for a hundred years, Rumley would have something like 88,303,500 inhabitants at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Freddy was looked upon as a mathematical "shark." The North Rumley school, presided over by Mr. Elwell, contained no such prodigy, but it did have an exceedingly promising half-back in the person of Oliver October Baxter.

But this is beside the point. Rumley's phenomenal growth over a period of ten years was due to several causes. In the first place, it had become a divisional railroad point, with shops, a roundhouse and superintendent's headquarters. It was now a "junction" as well, a new branch line connecting there with the main line for points east and south. This had brought nearly three hundred new citizens to the town. Then had come the "strawboard works," employing about thirty men, and after that the "cellulose factory," with some fifteen or eighteen people on the pay-roll. Later on, in 1896, a "cannery" was added to the list of industries. These extraordinary symptoms of prosperity drew capital of another character to the town. Two saloons, with pool and billiard rooms attached, were opened on Clay Street and did a thriving business from the start, notwithstanding the opposition of the Presbyterian and Methodist churches. New grocery stores, butcher shops, drygoods stores and so forth were established by outside interests, each of them bringing fresh enterprise and competition to the once drowsy hamlet.

The older stores were forced to expand in order to keep up with the times and conditions. House building in all parts of town had boomed. Three substantial new brick business "blocks" were erected—all three-story affairs—and an addition of twelve rooms and a bath had been tacked onto the old Bon Ton Restaurant, transforming it, quite properly, into the Hubbard House, the leading hostelry of the town.

Oliver Baxter owned one of the new business "blocks" on Clay Street. It was known as the Baxter Block, erected in 1896. His own enlarged place of business occupied one half of the ground floor, the other half being leased to Silas Link, who conducted a furniture, cabinetmaking and undertaking establishment there, with palms in the front windows.

Link's Livery Stable and the feed yard of Joseph Sikes had been consolidated, the sign over the sidewalk on Webster Street reading "Link & Sikes, Livery & Feed." The second floor of the Baxter Block was occupied by Dr. Slade, the dentist, and Simons & Sons, Tailors. The third floor was known as Knights of Pythias Hall, and it was here that all the "swellest" dances and receptions were held. Collapsible chairs from Link's Undertaking Parlors were rentable for all such festive occasions, a very satisfactory arrangement in that cartage was never an item of expense. Link's three or four piece orchestra could also be engaged by calling at or telephoning to the aforesaid parlors, where Charlie Link, the embalmer, would be pleased to guarantee satisfaction. Charlie was Silas's nephew, and a trap-drummer of great dexterity. Catering by Mrs. Hubbard, of the Hubbard House, terms on application. Flowers for all occasions supplied from Link's new greenhouse and garden, Cemetery Lane.

It is worthy of mention that there was no Main Street in Rumley. In rechristening the principal thoroughfare, the board of trustees deliberately violated all traditions by giving it the name of Clay Street, not in honor of the celebrated Henry Clay but because for at least two generations it had been known as the clay road on account of the natural color and character of its soil. This reduced confusion among the older and more settled inhabitants to a minimum; they very cheerfully consented to spell clay with a capital C and declared it wasn't half as much trouble as they thought it would be to remember to say Street instead of Road. But even so, it was still a clay road—and in rainy weather a very *bad* clay road.

Mary Baxter died of typhoid fever when young Oliver was nearing seven. Her untimely demise revived the half-forgotten prophecy of the gypsy fortune-teller. People looked severely at each other and, in hushed tones, discussed the inexorable ways of fate. Those acquainted with the

story of that October night told it to newcomers in Rumley; even the doubters and scoffers were impressed. It was the first "sign" that young Oliver's fortune was coming true. Somehow people were kinder and gentler to him after his mother died.

As for Oliver the elder, there was a strange—one might almost believe, triumphant—expression in his stricken, anxious eyes, as if back of them in his mind he was crying: "Now will you laugh at me for believing what that woman said?"

Of an entirely different nature was the agitation created by the unrighteous behavior of the preacher's wife. It all came like a bolt out of the blue. No one ever suspected that she had gone away to stay. Why, half the women in town, on learning that she was going to Chicago for a brief visit with her folks, went around to the parsonage to kiss her good-by and to wish her a very pleasant time. Some of them accompanied her to the railway depot and kissed her again, while two or three young men almost came to blows over who should carry her suitcase into the day coach and see that she was comfortably seated. They were all members of Mr. Sage's church.

Josephine had a remarkable faculty for drawing young men into the fold. Several who had been more or less criticized for their loose ways suddenly got religion and went to church twice every Sabbath and to prayer meeting on Wednesday nights with unbelievable perseverance until they found out that it wasn't doing them the least bit of good.

Excoriation and a stream of "I told you so's" were bestowed upon the pretty young wife and mother when it became known that she was not coming back.

The Presbyterians made a great show of pitying their pastor, and the Methodists made an even greater show of pitying the Presbyterians—which, when all is said and done, was the thing that made Josephine's act an absolutely unpardonable one.

She did not belong in Rumley. That was the long and the short of it. The greatest compliment ever paid to the holy state of matrimony was her ability to stick it out for six long years. In her own peculiar way she loved and respected her husband. But the bonds of love were not strong enough to hold her. She was gay and blithe and impious; she loved life even more than she loved love. The shackles hurt. So she slipped out of them one day and left their symbols lying by the wayside in the shape of a broken, bewildered man and a child of her own flesh, while she went back to the world that was calling her to its arms.

Herbert Sage was stunned, bewildered.... She wrote him from Chicago at the end of the first week of what was to have been a fortnight's visit to her mother. It was a long, fond letter in which she said she was not coming back—at least, not for the present. She was leaving at once for New York, where she had been promised a trial by one of the greatest of American producers. A month later came a telegram from her saying she was rehearsing a part in a new piece that was sure to be the "hit of the season"—everybody said so, even the stage director who had the name of being the biggest "gloom" in New York. It was a musical comedy, with a popular comedian as the star, and she had a small part that was going to be a big one before she got through with it—or so she said in her joyous conceit.

"With my good looks, my voice, my figure and my ambition, Herby, I cannot fail to get over. Everybody says I've got talent, and that dance I used to do for you on week days when it wasn't necessary to be sanctimonious—well, they are all crazy about it. Before you know it, my dear, you'll be the husband of one of the most celebrated young women in the United States and I'll be cashing checks every week that will make your whole year's salary in that burg look like the change out of a silver half dollar after you've bought two ten cent sodas at Fry's drug store. You will be proud of me, Herby, because I will take mighty good care that you never have any reason to be ashamed of me or for me to be ashamed of myself. You know what I mean. I don't suppose I will say my prayers as often as I did when you were around to remind me of them but I will be a good girl just the same. Also a wise one."

That was four years ago. Her confidence in herself had been justified, and, for all we know, the same may be said of Herbert Sage's confidence in her. She had the talent, the voice, the beauty, and above all, the magnetism, and so there was no holding her back. She was being "featured" now, and there was talk of making a star of her. Her letters to Herbert were not very frequent but they invariably were tender. Every once in a while the press agent sent him a large batch of "notices," chiefly eulogistic; and regularly on little Jane's birthday a good sized check arrived for the youngster's "nest egg."

At first she had undertaken to share her salary with Sage. He kindly but firmly refused to accept the money. After three checks had been returned to her she accepted the situation, although she wrote to him that he was a "silly old thing" and "hoped to goodness he would see the error of his ways before long."

For two successive seasons she appeared in a Chicago theater, following long New York runs of the pieces in which she was playing, but not once did Herbert Sage go up to see her. Some of the best people in Rumley saw her, however—one of them, in fact, went three nights in succession to the theater in which she was playing and tried to catch her eye from the balcony—so it was pretty generally known throughout the town that she really had the making of a pretty fair actress in her!

Finally, in one of her letters announcing a prospective engagement in London, she put the question to him: "Do you want to get a divorce from me, Herby?" His reply was terse and brought from her the following undignified but manifestly sincere telegram: "Neither do I, so we'll stick till the cows come home. I feel like a girl who has just been kissed. Sailing Friday. Will cable. Much love."

She made a "hit" in London in the big musical success of that season. They liked her so well over there that they wouldn't let her go back to the States.

At the time of which I write she was playing her first engagement in London, and half the town was in love with her. She wrote to Herbert:

"My dear, you wouldn't believe the number of matrimonial offers I've had, and your hair would turn white in a single night if I was to tell you how many homes I could wreck if I hadn't brought my conscience along with me. I am the toast of the town, as they say over here. Better than a roast, isn't it?"

While Herbert Sage forbore speaking of the vagrant Josephine to his friends in Rumley, nevertheless he preserved and re-read from time to time the mass of press cuttings that he kept safely locked away in a drawer of the bureau that once had held her cheap and meager belongings. He looked long and hungrily at the countless photographs with which she never failed to beleaguer him in his loneliness; and then there were the magazines, the pictorial sections of the newspapers and the reproductions of as many as a score of original drawings done by celebrated artists and illustrators on both sides of the Atlantic. Some of these caused him to frown and bite his lip—one in particular: the rather startling picture of a very shapely young gentleman in a mild but attractive state of inebriation caroling (by mistake, no doubt), to an irate old man in a casement window above.

Morning and night she was in his prayers; and little Jane, as soon as she was able to prattle, was taught to say "and God bless and keep my mamma forever and ever, Amen!"

She was greatly missed by little Oliver October. For some reason—perhaps she did not explain it herself—at any rate, she did not go to the trouble of speculating—she had taken a tremendous fancy to the child. He was a lively, amusing little chap who laughed gleefully at her antics and was ever ready for more—a complimentary spirit that constantly supplied kindling for her own unquenchable fires. She romped with him, told marvelous stories to him, sang for him and danced for him—and just about the time she was making ready to leave Rumley guiltily showed him how to turn a "cartwheel"! He was very much impressed by this astonishing bit of acrobatics, and as she faced him, her face crimson and her eyes sparkling, he paid her a doubtful but fulsome compliment by saying he'd bet his mother couldn't do it, nor any other lady in town, either. She made him promise not to tell anybody—and he was never, *never* to ask her to do it again, because she was getting very old and the next time she might fall and break her neck, and he wouldn't like that, would he?

This small boy of five or six was the only being in town with whom she could play to her heart's content, and she made the most of him. Her own tiny baby interested but did not amuse her. In the first place, she had not wanted a baby at all, and in the second place since she *had* to have one she could not understand why she had not had a boy. It wasn't quite fair. She liked boy babies. It was something to be the mother of a man-child—something to be proud of. She even went so far as to say to herself that she never could have run way and left her baby if it had been a boy. She would have been ashamed to have a son of hers know that his mother had not quite played the game. She was fond of Jane but it was not as hard to leave her as it would have been had she been a boy. Of that she was absolutely certain.

Oliver October could not understand why he was not allowed to mention "Aunt" Josephine's name in the presence of "Uncle" Herbert. His mother and Mrs. Serepta Grimes—who, by the way, was still an ever-present help in time of trouble—gave him very strict orders and repeated them so often that he never had a chance to forget them. But when he found out in a roundabout way that Mrs. Sage had gone off to join a show, he at once assumed—and quite naturally, too—that she was with Barnum's Biggest Show on Earth, and lived in joyous anticipation of seeing her when the great three-ring circus came to the nearby county seat for its biennial visit. Moreover, he was very firm in his determination to run away from home and join the show, a secret decision that called for unusual industry on his part in the matter of mastering the "cartwheel" and other startling feats of skill, such as standing on his head, walking on his hands, turning somersaults off

of a sill in the haymow, and standing upright on the capacious hindquarters of patient old Rosy down at Uncle Silas Link's livery stable.

He also undertook to increase his suppleness by anointing himself with fish worm oil, an absolutely infallible lubricant recommended by Bud Lane, who solemnly averred that he had worked one whole season with the Forepaugh circus as fish worm catcher for the Human Eel, the limberest man alive. Oliver October's mother gave him a sound spanking within fifteen minutes after the initial application of this diligently acquired lubricant, while Mrs. Grimes made a point of hurrying down to the livery stable to tell the sheepish Bud Lane what she thought of him.

Youth is ever fickle. Oliver October's heart was soon mended. He was always to have a warm corner in it for the gay Aunt Josephine but such diverting games as "one old cat," "blackman," "I spy," and "duck on the rock" rather too promptly reduced his passionate longing for her to a mild but pleasant memory. They also interfered with his acrobatic aspirations, and it was not until little Jane Sage arrived at an age when she was intelligent enough to be impressed and thrilled by manly achievements that he again took up the "cartwheel," the "hand spring," and other sensational feats of endurance—endurance being a better word than agility in view of the fact that he practised them by the hour for her especial benefit.

For, be it here recorded, Janie Sage, at the age of six, was by far the prettiest and the most sought after young lady in Rumley, and only the most surpassing skill with the hands and feet was supposed to have any effect upon her susceptibilities.

What with having had past instructions in the art of cartwheel flipping from a minister's wife and the present promise of lessons in boxing from the minister himself, Oliver October was indeed a favored lad! He was very glad that he had gone to Sunday-school regularly, for therein lay the secret of his good fortune. If he had not been a very good little boy, Mr. and Mrs. Sage would not have been so kind to him. There wasn't the slightest doubt in his mind about that. And more than all this, Mr. Sage acted like he was awfully pleased every time he walked home from school with Jane, carrying her books and everything. He showed this by invariably giving him a piece of bread and butter and sugar. No wonder, then, that Oliver fought like a tiger for his lady love. Many a bigger and stronger man than he has fought the whole wide world for his bread and butter alone.

Three or four days after the warning administered to Oliver by his self-appointed guardians, one of the latter, Mr. Sikes, found himself in an

extremely awkward position. He was a man of dark and lasting hatreds. His particular aversion was brothers-in-law. He had two of his own and he hated both of them as men are seldom hated by their fellow man. His opinion of them somewhat unjustly extended itself to the brothers-in-law of practically every friend he possessed. It had got to be an obsession with him. The husbands of his two sisters, it appears, had instituted some sort of proceedings against him in court back in the dark and stormy age that he called his youth, and while history does not reveal the nature of the suit, it goes without saying that they won their case, thereby providing him with an everlasting grudge against all brothers-in-law.

Horace Gooch had come over from Hopkinsville to see his wife's brother on a matter of business. Ten years had not improved Mr. Gooch. If you had asked Mr. Sikes, however, whether they had improved him he would have blasphemously answered in the affirmative. He would have stated—if he had thought of it—that anything that shortened the life of Mr. Gooch could not be otherwise than a most gratifying improvement.

Now this is what happened—and any fair-minded person will sympathize with Mr. Sikes in his dilemma. As Gooch was leaving the Baxter Hardware Store, after a furious wrangle with his brother-in-law—Mr. Sikes had heard most of it through an open window—he had the option of either stepping over or around a half-grown puppy lying immediately in front of the door. He did neither. Notwithstanding the friendly thumping of the puppy's tail on the board sidewalk and the hospitable smile in his big brown eyes, Mr. Gooch proceeded to remove the obstruction with the toe of his boot. He did not do it gently. A sharp yelp of pain was succeeded by a series of ear-splitting howls as the gangling pup went tearing down the street on three legs.

Mr. Sikes turned the corner of the building just in time to witness this incident. He was also a witness to what followed almost immediately. Oliver October and Sammy Parr were playing "keeps" against the brick wall a dozen paces or so away. Now, it so happened that the former, and not Mr. Baxter, senior, was the sole owner of that sacred pup. Before you could say Jack Robinson, Oliver October was blazing away at the retreating figure of his uncle with marbles he had just won from Sammy. He did not take the time to look for stones in the gutter. His face was white with fury. Mr. Gooch uttered a sharp ejaculation and suddenly clutched his left elbow with his right hand. An instant later the most universally coveted "agate" in Rumley grazed his ear and went hurtling down Clay Street. Mr. Sikes, forgetting himself for the moment, cried out:

"Good shot! Give it to him!"

Another hastily fired "plaster" got Mr. Gooch on the leg, and then young Oliver took to his heels—not because he was afraid of his uncle but because he had caught sight of the far more terrifying figure of Mr. Sikes.

"Whose boy is that?" demanded the outraged Mr. Gooch, addressing Mr. Sikes.

"None of your damned business," snarled Mr. Sikes, lowering his chin in a menacing way.

"I will make it my business," roared the other. "I'll have the little scoundrel locked up for—"

"You just go ahead and try it," broke in Mr. Sikes, advancing slowly. "Just you go ahead and try it. That's all I got to say. Go ahead and try it."

By this time Mr. Gooch had recognized the angry citizen.

"Oho! Mr. Sikes, eh? Well, what cause have you got for losing your temper like this, Mr. Sikes? What right have you to get mad because I ask you the name of a dodgasted little—"

"Mad? I'm not mad," interrupted Mr. Sikes violently. "And I'll tell you who that boy is if you really want to know."

"I do," said Mr. Gooch, feeling of his elbow.

"Well, he is the owner of that pup you just kicked in the ribs. Good day!"

With that, Mr. Sikes stalked around the corner, a prey to conflicting emotions. He stole down the alley, with many a furtive glance over his shoulder. He felt very guilty. He had openly, vociferously encouraged Oliver October in the commission of a deed of violence. Suppose, for instance, one of those rocks—(he did not know they were marbles)—had struck Horace Gooch at the base of the brain! He wiped his moist forehead. Just suppose! And how was he to take Oliver to task for flying into a rage and throwing stones, with murderous intent, when he himself had been so overjoyed that he yelled to him to keep it up? Yes, he was in a very awkward position. So he decided that unless somebody took him to task for *not* taking Oliver October to task, he would consider the incident closed. But every time he thought of the way Horace Gooch grabbed his elbow and subsequently clapped his hand to his "off" leg, he gave way to inordinate mirth.

At supper that evening Mr. Baxter asked his son if he knew who it was that hit his Uncle Horace with a rock. Oliver had spent most of the afternoon

in hiding. Hunger and the approach of night were responsible for his decision to give himself up, so to speak. Just before the supper hour he ventured out of his place of hiding—a cornfield down the road—prepared to face the town marshal and arrest. His dog had basely deserted him an hour or so earlier. His spirits rose a little as he took his seat at the table, for old Oliver appeared to be in an unusually cheerful frame of mind. Just as he began to feel that, after all, there was nothing to face, his father frowned severely and asked:

"Oliver, do you know who hit your Uncle Horace with a stone this afternoon?"

There was a loophole. "I didn't know anybody hit him with a stone, Pa."

Mr. Baxter reflected. "Well, what *was* he hit with if it wasn't a stone?"

"A marble."

"Do you know who threw it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who?"

"Me," replied Oliver October, and was suddenly thrilled by the thought of George Washington and the cherry tree.

"Well, you must never do it again," said his father mildly. Then, in his most jovial manner: "Pass up your plate, sonny, and let me give you some more of this steak. It will make you strong."

CHAPTER VIII

GLIDING OVER A FEW YEARS

It is not the purpose of the narrator of this story to deal at length with the deeds, exploits, mishaps and sensations of Oliver October as a child. Pages, even reams, could be written—and certainly not wasted—in recording the innumerable adventures that befell him between his tenth and seventeenth years.

If time and space permitted, it would be a pleasure to tell how he learned to swim and dance, to drive an automobile, and to play the mandolin and the allied instruments of torture comprising a trap drummer's outfit; how he felt when he put on his first pair of long pants; how he earned his first dollar; how he headed an expedition to dig for gold in the ravine reaching out from the upper end of Death Swamp; how he organized the far-famed band of robbers that twice came to grief before reforming—once in Mr. Higgins's watermelon patch and later on in the vicinity of Mr. Whistler's bee hives; how he fell in love with pretty Miss Somers, the high-school teacher, and couldn't keep his mind on his studies; how he performed the common miracle of changing himself from an untidy, dirty-faced boy into a painfully immaculate personage with plastered hair, well-brushed garments, soap-scoured hands, and an astonishing tendency to turn scarlet when he most desired to be complacently pallid; how he screwed up the courage to ask his best girl—at that time a very tall and angular maiden named Jennie Torbeck—to go with him to the theater up at the county seat, and how he lost all affection for her and was miserably disillusioned when she coughed all through the performance and caused people to crane their necks and scowl at them.

In short, how he grew up to be five feet eleven inches tall and stripped at one hundred and seventy pounds of absolutely healthy bone and tissue.

And then it would be an even greater satisfaction to tell of the time he sucked the blood and poison out of the foot of a small boy who had been bitten by a rattlesnake; of the memorable day when he grabbed and hung on to the bit of a horse that was running away with Jane Sage, then twelve years old, alone in the careening phaëton; of the midsummer afternoon when he came near to losing his own life in saving that of a drowning companion. These and many other things could be told of him, but it would only be a case of history repeating itself inasmuch as the untold stories of countless

red-blooded American boys would contain, in one form or another, all that befell Oliver October Baxter.

On the other hand, it would be the disagreeable duty of the chronicler to set down in black and white all the unpleasant and trying experiences resulting from the ceaseless espionage that clouded his daily life and doings. All that need be said about this unhappy phase of his development may be confined to a single sentence: he was never free from the advice, direction and criticism of four devoted old men. He had advice from Mr. Sage, direction from the Messrs. Sikes and Link, and a plaintive sort of criticism from his father. Serepta Grimes, who loved him as she would have loved a son of her own, gave him the right kind of advice, good soul that she was. She advised him to be patient; he would be twenty-one before he knew it, and then he could tell 'em to mind their own business. It would be necessary, she ruefully acknowledged, to tell practically the entire population of Rumley to mind its own business, but the ones that really mattered were Silas Link and Joe Sikes.

"But they are such corking old boys, Aunt Serepta," he was wont to lament; "and they are trying to be good to me. I wouldn't hurt their feelings for the world."

"They're a couple of buzzards, Oliver."

"I get pretty sore at them sometimes," he would confess, crinkling his brows. "But I guess I'd better wait till I'm past thirty before I jump on 'em, hadn't I?"

"I guess maybe you had," Serepta would agree, for down in her heart she too was afraid.

He was seventeen when he left the Rumley high-school and became a freshman at the State University. There had been some talk of sending him to one of the big Eastern colleges, but when Mr. Sikes pointed out to Mr. Link that he didn't see how either one of them could give up his business and go East to spend the winters, the latter flopped over and took sides with him against Oliver senior, who was for sending him to Princeton because Mary had taken a strong fancy to that distant seat of learning after hearing Mr. Sage dilate upon its standards.

He made the football and baseball teams in his sophomore year, and was "spiked" by the most impenetrable Greek fraternity before he had been on the campus twenty-four hours. His fame had preceded him. He also was able to show his newly-made freshman friends so many of the fine points about

boxing that they proclaimed him a marvel and wanted to know where he had picked it all up. He refused to divulge the long-kept secret. Moreover, he astonished them with his unparalleled skill at turning cartwheels. And besides all this, he astonished the faculty by being up in his studies from the week he entered college to the day he left it with a diploma in his hand. He took the full course in engineering, and not without reason was the prediction of the Dean of the School that one day Oliver Baxter would make his mark in the world.

The last of the three decades allotted to him by the gypsy was shorn of its first twelve months when he received his degree. As Mr. Sikes announced to the Reverend Sage at the conclusion of the commencement exercises, he had less than nine more years to live at the very outside—a gloomy statement that drew from the proud and happy minister ah unusually harsh rejoinder.

"You ought to be kicked all the way home for saying such a thing as that, Joe Sikes. To-day of all days! You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Why can't you be happy like all the rest of us?"

"Happy?" exploded Mr. Sikes. "Why, I'm the happiest man alive. This is the greatest day of my life."

"Well, then, for goodness' sake, don't spoil it for me," complained the tall, gray pastor. Turning to the slim, pretty girl who walked beside him across the June-warmed campus, he spoke these words of comfort: "Don't mind this old croaker, Jane dear. He is still living back in the dark ages, when they believed in witchcraft, ghosts and hobgoblins."

Mr. Sikes was not offended. His broad, seamed face, leathery with the curing of many suns, was alight with his rare but whole-hearted grin.

"You left out fairies, parson," he said, and winked at Jane over his shoulder. "The older she gets, the more I believe in 'em."

"Sometimes you can be silly enough to satisfy anybody, Uncle Joe," said she, gayly.

"Second childhood," declared Serepta Grimes, trudging several feet behind Old Joe, who had a habit of keeping at least two paces ahead of any one with whom he walked.

Mr. Sikes accepted this with serenity. "Well," he said, "if it's second childhood, Serepty, I hope I never get over it. But I'm all-fired glad of one thing. He's through playing football and I won't have to act like an idiot any more. I'm too blamed old to jump up and down and yell like an Indian every

time he makes a long run. People thought I was a lunatic at that game last fall. The idea of a man sixty-nine years old—Hello, here comes his pa. Say, what's the matter, Ollie? What are you cryin' about?"

"I've just been talking to the president of the University," said Mr. Baxter, the tears streaming down his wrinkled cheeks.

"Well, what of it?"

"He said Oliver was about the finest boy they ever had in the college."

"Is that anything to blubber about?"

"You bet it is," gulped old Oliver, smiling through his tears. "You just bet your sweet life it is."

A word in passing about Jane Sage. She was a slender, graceful girl slightly above medium height, just turning into young womanhood—that alluring, mysterious stage that baffles the imagination and confounds the emotions. Her gray eyes, set widely apart under a broad brow, were clear and soft and wistful, and yet in their untrammeled depths stirred the glow of an intelligence far beyond her slender years. She was an extremely pretty girl. Her mouth was rather large and, like her mother's, humorous. Her hair, brown, wavy and abundant, grew low upon her forehead. Her teeth were small, even and as white as snow; she showed them when she smiled. There were faint dimples in her cheeks.

She kept house for her father, and, at seventeen, made no secret of her determination never to get married! That was settled. Never! She was going to take care of her daddy as long as he lived, and, as she was serenely confident that he would live to be a very old man—indeed, she could not conjure up the thought of him dying at all as other mortals are bound to do sooner or later—there wasn't any way in the world for her to avoid being an old maid.

If she possessed any of her mother's powers of mimicry, they were never revealed by word or deed. She was singularly lacking in histrionic ability and for that her father was thankful though secretly surprised. Friends of the family, remembering Josephine's propensities watched closely for signs of an undesirable heritage, and were somewhat disappointed when they failed to develop. If she had not borne such a striking resemblance to her mother, everybody in town would have said that she "took after her father"—and that would have explained everything. That far-distant, almost mythical mother, was no more than a dream to Jane. It was hard for her to believe that the famous actress, Josephine Judge, was her mother; she was secretly proud

of the distinguished isolation in which it placed her among her less favored companions.

She adored Oliver October. There had been a time when she was his sweetheart, but that was ages ago—when both of them were young! Now he was supposed to be engaged to a girl in the graduating class—and Jane was going to be an old maid—so the childish romance was over. She wished she knew the girl, however, so that she could be sure that Oliver was getting some one who was good enough for him.

Late in the fall of 1911, young Oliver, having passed the age of twenty-one and being a free and independent agent, packed his bag and trunk and shook the dust of Rumley from his feet. Through the influence of an older member of his "frat," supported by the customary recommendation from the college authorities, he was offered and accepted a position in the construction department of a Chicago engineering and investment concern interested in the financing and developing of water power plants in the northwest. His work took him, in the course of time, to the Rocky Mountain region, where concessions had been obtained and plants were either being installed or projected.

There was grave uneasiness in Rumley when he fared forth in quest of fame and fortune. Many were the predictions that Chicago would be the ruination of him; he was bound to fall in with evil companions in that wicked city, and into evil ways. College had been bad enough—but Chicago!

Yes, he was working inevitably toward the end prophesied by the gypsy. Next thing they would hear of his drinking and carousing and leading the gay, riotous life of the ungodly, and then, sure as anything, he would get mixed up in some disgraceful brawl—well, he might be innocent of the actual murder but that wouldn't save him if the circumstantial evidence was strong enough—as it would be.

And then, when old Oliver resignedly announced that his son was going up into the wild and lawless northwest, where everybody carried guns and lynchings were common, there was real consternation among the older families in Rumley. One very ancient lady went so far in her senile sympathy as to put into words the question that had been in her thoughts for days. Chancing to meet old Oliver on the way home from church one Sunday, she sadly inquired whether he would bring Oliver October's body all the way back to Rumley for burial or leave it out there in the wilderness.

Early in 1913 he was sent to China by his company on a mission that kept him in the Orient for nearly a year and a half. A week before Christmas, 1914, the Rumley *Despatch* came out with the announcement—under a double head—that Oliver October Baxter was returning from the Far East, where he had been engaged in the most stupendous enterprise ever undertaken by American capital, and would arrive on the 22nd to spend the Christmas holidays with his father and to renew acquaintances with old friends—who were legion.

"Samuel Parr, the well-known insurance agent," said the *Despatch*, "who is to be married on the 29th to Miss Laura Nickels, received a telegram this morning from Mr. Baxter in which he states that he will be happy to officiate as best man at the ceremony which, instead of being solemnized at the home of the bride's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Nickels, on Grant Street, as originally planned, will take place in the Presbyterian Church at eight o'clock in the evening. Miss Jane Sage will be the maid-of-honor. Mr. Baxter's many friends will be glad to welcome him to the hustling city of his nativity. He has succeeded well in his profession and has gone forward with remarkable rapidity for one of his years. Few young men have achieved, etc., etc."

The word that he was back in the United States and on his way to Rumley created quite a little excitement in town. It was the opinion of a good many people that he now stood a pretty fair chance of escaping the fate prescribed for him by the gypsy fortune-teller—provided, of course, he could be persuaded to remain in Rumley for the next five years, ten months, one week and five days.

He arrived on the eleven-twenty from Chicago and was met at the depot by a delegation. Samuel Parr was master of ceremonies.

"Stand back just a minute, will you?" Sammy commanded, addressing those in the front rank of the crowd. "Give his poor old father a chance to shake hands with him, can't you? Just a minute, Mr. Sikes. That means you, too. Slow, now—*slow*, Mr. Link. This isn't a funeral. Hello, Oliver! How's the boy? Here's your father—over this way. Never mind your suitcases. I'll tend to 'em."

Young Oliver rushed up to his father, both hands extended.

"Hello, dad! My old dad!"

"I can't believe my eyes—no, sir, I can't," cried the old man, quaveringly. He was wringing his son's hand. "You're back again, alive and

sound. For nearly three years I've been sitting around waiting for a telegram or something telling me—"

"You bet I'm alive," broke in Oliver October, laying his arm over the old man's shoulder and patting his back. "And you don't look a day older than when I left, 'pon my soul, you don't. It's mighty good to see you, and it's wonderful to be back in the old town again. Hello, Uncle Joe! Well, you see they haven't hung me yet."

"And they ain't going to if I can help it," roared Mr. Sikes, pumping Oliver's arm vigorously. "Not on your life! We got a few more years to go, and, by glory, we're going to keep you right here in this town from now on. It's all fixed, Oliver. We've got you the appointment of city civil engineer for Rumley, population five thousand and over, salary eighteen hundred a year. How's that? The Common Council took action on it last Monday night, unanimous vote, politics be damned. All of the democrats voted for you. No opposition to—"

"Give somebody else a chance, will you?" interrupted Sammy Parr, and coolly shouldered the older man aside. "Come over here, Oliver, I want to introduce you to the bride-elect. She came here to live after you went away, and she's crazy to meet you. Just a minute, Mr. Link. Plenty of time—plenty of time. Don't crowd! Ladies first—ladies first."

"Where is Jane, Mr. Sage?" inquired Oliver October, when he had a breathing spell. He was searching the outer edge of the throng with eager, happy eyes.

"She is up at your father's house, Oliver, helping Mrs. Grimes and Annie with your home-coming dinner," replied the minister, still gripping the young man's hand. "It is good to see you, my boy—God bless you."

"I've never forgotten the things you said to me the day I went away, Uncle Herbert. I've led a pretty clean life, sir, and I've never done anything I'm ashamed of. I've done a lot of things I've been sorry for—but nothing to be ashamed of." He leaned close to the other's ear and said in a low, whimsical tone: "Don't let it get to the ears of my other uncles, but I'd hate to tell you how many times I've thanked the Lord and you for those sparring lessons you gave me."

" 'The Lord loveth a cheerful giver,' " quoth the Reverend Mr. Sage dryly.

On the way up to the old home, Oliver's father, waiting until he saw a clear stretch of road ahead, turned from the steering wheel of his brand new

Ford, and, eyeing his son narrowly, said:

"Yes, sir, you've surely got my nose, and you've almost got my hair. If you was to let your mustache grow I guess it would be a good deal like mine used to be. You've made a success of everything so far, from all reports, and now, darn it all, they've got you started in politics with this appointment. I fought it tooth and nail, but they argued me down, claiming it can't be a political job so long as both parties want you to take—"

"You needn't worry about that, father. I'll not accept the position."

Mr. Baxter brightened. "You won't? Good for you! That'll show Joe Sikes and Silas Link they can't run everything."

"I have other plans. I will tell you about them later on, father."

"Of course, you're a good deal taller and heavier than I am," went on Mr. Baxter, staring ahead. "You don't take after me when it comes to size and build. Been out in the open a good bit, I see. It's done you a lot of good." He shot a glance at his son's rugged, tanned face. "Yes, and your eyes are clear and bright. I guess you haven't done much drinking or staying up late o' nights."

"I don't drink very much—very little, in fact. Never have. In my business a fellow has to have his wits about him. As for being up late nights, I have seen many a night when I didn't go to bed at all."

"That sounds bad," said Mr. Baxter sourly. "I don't see how it could help interfering with your work."

"It didn't interfere with it. You see, I was working all night."

"Extra pay?"

"No, sir. Just extra work."

Mr. Baxter cackled, cutting it short to toot his horn viciously for the benefit of a dog crossing the street two or three hundred feet away.

"I'm just learning," he explained.

"So I see," said his son, crimping his toes suddenly and then relaxing them as his father swung safely around a corner.

"Only had her about six weeks."

"What can you get out of her?"

"She's a racer."

"She is?"

"You bet she is. Seventy-five miles an hour."

"Gee, it's good to hear you lie so cheerfully, dad."

"If I'd had any idea you were going to believe me, I'd have claimed a hundred," said old Oliver, grinning. "See many changes in the town, sonny?"

"I thought Mr. Sage was looking a little older."

"Well, he is a little older. We all are, for that matter. I guess you'll find Jane has changed somewhat too. She's twenty-one. They say she's an uncommonly pretty girl."

"They say? Don't you see anything of her yourself?"

"See her nearly every day. I don't take much notice of girls these days, blast the luck. She comes in every once in a while to read the letters she gets from you. Seems as though I get a good deal more news out of the letters you write to her than the ones I get from you. You never wrote anything to me about the girl you was thinking of marrying out there in Montana, or the one in China either."

"I was always careful not to write anything unpleasant to you," said Oliver October glibly.

"Umph! Well, here we are. Don't be uneasy now. I know how to stop her."

And stop "her" he did, a dozen feet or so beyond the front porch steps.

"Set still. I'll back her up. Sort of slipped on the ice, I guess. We've had some mighty cold weather the last week or so."

The "uncommonly pretty girl" opened the front door.

"Hello, Oliver!" she cried.

"Hello, Jane!" he shouted back, as he ran up the steps. "Gee! it's great to see you. And, my goodness, what a big girl you are. You were just an overgrown kid when I went away. Funny how a fellow never thinks of a girl growing up just the same as he does."

He was holding her warm, strong hands in his own; they were looking straight into each other's eyes. In his there was wonder and incredulity; in hers the expression of one startled by a sudden indefinable sensation, something that came like a flash and left her strangely puzzled.

“You haven’t grown much,” she said slowly. “Except that you are a man and not a boy.”

“That’s it,” he cried. “The difference in you is that you’re a woman and not a girl. And I was counting on seeing you just as you were four years ago.”

“Come in,” she said, with a queer dignity that she herself did not understand. “Get out of that fur coat and—and give Aunt Serepta a big hug and a dozen kisses. She’s waiting for you in the sitting-room.”

He still held her hands. “Oh, I say, Jane, I—I used to kiss you when we were little kids. I—”

“But we are not little kids any longer, Oliver,” she cried, drawing back.

He stared hard at her. “Don’t tell me you’ve gone and got engaged to somebody, old girl.”

“I am not engaged to any one. I am not even in love with any one.”

“Well, all I’ve got to say is that this burg must have more than its share of blind men,” said he with conviction.

“Hey!” shouted his father. “Do you expect me to carry in these valises for you, you big lummix?”

“Put ’em down, dad. I’ll be out for them in a minute.”

“Well, see that you do.”

“He is getting to be terribly cranky, Oliver,” said Jane, lowering her voice.

“Do you mean—he’s actually sore?”

“Well, he’s—he’s very impatient sometimes,” she explained. “You’d better hurry.”

“Poor dad, he’s aged terribly in the last few years, hasn’t he? I was quite shocked.”

The welcome he received from Serepta Grimes was all that could be desired. After she had hugged and kissed—and wept over him a little—she ordered him to take his bags up stairs to his old room and not to be all day about it, because dinner would soon be ready and they were having company in his honor.

“See here, Aunt Serepta,” he began gayly, “I’m getting too old to be ordered around—and, what’s more, what right have you to come into a house of gladness and cast a spell of gloom over it? You sha’n’t boss the heir-apparent around as if he were a—”

“You do as I tell you, or I’ll speak to Santa Claus about you,” she broke in, with mock severity. “Don’t forget Christmas is coming.”

When he came down stairs, after having unpacked his bags and scattered the contents all over the room, he found the “company” already assembled. As might have been expected, the guests included the Reverend Mr. Sage, Mr. Sikes, and Mr. Link, and one outsider: the Mayor of Rumley, Mr. Samuel Belding.

“What’s this I hear?” demanded the latter sternly, as he shook hands with the young man. “Your father’s just been telling us you won’t accept the distinguished honor the city of Rumley has conferred upon you through the unanimous vote of the Common Council. What’s the matter with it? Ain’t the pay big enough for you? It’s the chance of a life time, my boy. Rumley is going ahead like a house afire. We’re going to open up and pave two or three new streets, put in a new sewerage system and a crematory, build a bridge over the railroad tracks at Clay Street crossing, and—”

“I don’t believe a darned word of it,” broke in Mr. Sikes, almost plaintively.

“What’s that?” demanded the Mayor, going purple in the face. “You don’t believe what I’m—”

“I wasn’t thinking about you,” said Mr. Sikes. “I don’t believe Oliver means what he says.”

“Like as not he never said it,” put in Mr. Link, eyeing old Oliver darkly.

“Oh, yes, he did,” said the latter cheerfully, and not in the least offended by the implication. “Didn’t you, Oliver?”

Oliver’s and Jane’s eyes met. She was standing beside her father a little apart from the garrulous group. He saw something in her dark, unsmiling eyes that puzzled him—something he was a long, long time in fathoming.

“The truth of the matter is,” he said seriously, “I have other plans. I appreciate the honor. The pay has nothing to do with my decision. I love the old burg and I am proud to have been born here. I have just given up a job that has been paying me nearly four times as much as what I would be

getting here, Mr. Belding. And it will be open to me whenever I choose to go back with the company. That is understood. I—"

"You say you've quit your job?" broke in his father, aghast.

"Yes, sir," quietly. "I gave it up last week."

"A job paying more than seven thousand a year?"

"Just seven thousand, to be exact."

"Well, of all the idiotic—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Mr. Link. "The thing is, he may be resigning on account of ill health. Now that I've had a good look at you, Oliver, I must say your eyes seem a little liverish. Not exactly liverish, either, but sort of bright and feverish. If you—"

"I am perfectly well, Uncle Silas," said Oliver, smiling. Again his eyes sought Jane's. They seemed darker and deeper than before. "No, it isn't my health that's caused me to give up my job. Needn't worry about my health, dad." While he addressed his father he was subtly conscious of speaking solely for Jane's benefit. "But, come along; let's have dinner. I'm as hungry as a bear. We can talk about my affairs afterwards. With the cigars. I brought you a box of the finest cigars I could find in Chicago, father. You'll hear the flapping of angels' wings every time you light one of 'em and take a few puffs."

"You've got no business buying expensive cigars when you're out of a job," grumbled his father. "Giving up a place with seven—"

"Maybe he's going to get married," burst out the Mayor, nudging the young man in the ribs. "That accounts for his eyes being feverish and—and sometimes when a feller is in love he does get to be a little bit liverish."

"That accounts for it," said Mr. Sikes, very much relieved. "He's going to marry a woman with plenty of money. He don't have to work any more, Ollie. I hope to goodness she ain't got any brothers to make trouble for him after the nuptials have worn off a little. One brother-in-law can do more to make a feller—"

"I am not going to be married," said Oliver, blushing for no reason at all, and thereby convincing the attentive Jane that if he wasn't going to be married it was through no fault of his own. "Nobody will have me," he added lamely.

“Of course, if you’ve been going around telling everybody what’s ahead of you,” said Mr. Sikes, “I don’t blame ’em for not wanting to risk being tied up to a feller—”

“Shut up!” cried Serepta Grimes, from the dining-room door. “You make me sick, Joe Sikes, the way you go on. Dinner’s ready. You sit over here next to Jane, Oliver. This is your place, Sam.”

“There’s another thing,” said the Mayor, very profoundly. “If you take this job we’re offering you, Oliver, it’s bound to lead to something better. I don’t mind telling you that I’m not going to be a candidate for re-election. I’ve got two years more to serve and then I’m through. This here town needs a young, active, progressive man for mayor. Some of us have been talking things over and we’ve about decided that we know the feller that ought to step into my shoes. He is a young man of vast experience, education, integrity, ability, and he’s a good Republican—at least, his father is. My shoes are pretty good-sized, but that’s a blessing. No matter who steps into ’em, they’re not likely to pinch. What size shoes do you wear, Oliver?”

“Sh!” hissed Mr. Baxter. “The parson’s waiting to bless the food.”

The host did not speak again until near the end of the meal. He was deeply pre-occupied.

“What is this plan of yours?” he suddenly asked, breaking in on Mr. Belding’s windy eulogy of the feast prepared by three of the “best cooks in the universe.”

Young Oliver started. “Hadn’t we better leave that till we’re alone—”

“No; let’s have it now,” said old Oliver testily. “Unless it’s something you’re ashamed of,” he amended, bending his gaze upon his son.

“I certainly am not ashamed of it.” A trace of irony, unintentional to be sure, crept into his voice. “I suppose you know there is a war going on?” His eyes swept the circle of listeners.

“Well, it’s kind of leaked out down our way,” spoke Mr. Link dryly.

“Damn the Kaiser,” said Mr. Belding, with feeling.

“Thank God, they turned him back at the Marne,” said Mr. Sage, speaking for the first time in many minutes.

“I know what you are planning to do, Oliver,” cried Jane, paling.

“Yes,” he said, nodding his head. “You would know. You’re young enough to know, Jane.”

“You are going over there to fight,” she cried, a thrill in her voice.

“Right you are. I’m going over in February with the Canadians. It’s all settled. I’m to have my old job back when the war is over.”

Deep silence followed the announcement. Mr. Baxter sat with his lips working, his Adam’s apple rising and falling in quick spasmodic jerks. Jane put her hand to her throat as if to release something that had got caught there and was stifling her.

“But it’s not our war,” said Mr. Sikes at last.

“It’s everybody’s war,” spoke young Oliver out of the very depths of his soul. “We will be in it some day. We can’t keep out of it. But I can’t wait. I’m going over now. Oh, I’ll come back, never fear. No chance of me being killed by a German bullet.” Here he grinned boyishly. “You see, Uncle Joe, I’ve just got to pull through alive and well, so that I can be hung when my time comes.”

CHAPTER IX

HOME FROM THE WAR

The war was over. Oliver October Baxter came through without a scratch. He saw two years of hard fighting with the glorious Canadians; when the United States went in, he gave up his hard-earned commission as first lieutenant and was transferred to the American Army. He learned a great deal about red tape before his transfer was effected, and he discovered to his disgust that he knew a great deal less about war than he might reasonably have been supposed to know after two years of slogging along at it under shot and shell from the German Armies. He had to go back to America and enter a training camp, and even then, to employ his own expression, he had the "devil of a time" getting a commission as second lieutenant.

There were so many able young business men and college graduates out for commissions that he just barely managed to scrape through "by the skin of his teeth" in the struggle for honors. The fact that he had had two years of actual experience at the front, part of that time as an officer, did not seem to help him very much with his studies at the "Camp," nor with the intensive drilling that was supposed to make a soldier of him in three months. Two medals for distinguished service on the field of battle were of absolutely no service to him in the contest that was being waged in the training camp—in fact, he was advised by the major in command that he would better not even speak of them, much less expose them to view.

Then, to his intense chagrin, he was sent from one camp to another—a sort of floating officer—finally winding up in a mid-western division that did not go over seas until the spring of 1918, only a few months before the war ended. Once with the Army in France, however, things took a belated change for the better. Far-sighted and fair-minded officers in high places were not slow in transferring him from the camp far behind the lines to a veteran division up in the battle zone. He went through the Argonne and was close on the bloody heels of the German Army when the last guns in the great conflict were fired. He came out a captain.

In April, 1919, he sailed from Brest and on the tenth of May arrived in Rumley, discharged from the Army and jobless. On the way home he stopped over in Chicago to notify his employers that he would be ready to resume work after a month's much-needed rest and quiet down in the old

town. He was blandly informed that as soon as anything turned up they would be pleased and happy to take him back into the concern, but at present there wasn't a vacancy in sight—in fact, they were cutting down the operating force wherever it was possible, and so on and so forth. Yes, they remembered perfectly that they had promised him his old place when he returned, but how in God's name were they to know that the war was going to last as long as it did? He couldn't expect them to hold a job open for him for nearly four years, could he? Only too glad to take you on again, Baxter, when things begin to pick up—and all that.

Being a captain in the Army and used to plain speaking, he told the astonished general manager what he thought of him and the whole works besides, and airily went his way.

The horrors of war had not affected his spirits. He went over in the first place full of cheer and enthusiasm; he came back without the latter, but indomitably possessed of the former. He had seen grim sights and sickened under the spectacle; he had stood by the side of dying comrades and wept as he would have wept over his own brother; he had known times when life was far harder to bear than the thought of death; and he had said what he believed to be his last prayer a hundred times or more. But when the guns ceased their everlasting roar and the smoke lifted to reveal a blue sky that smiled, he too smiled and was glad to be alive. He had lived on hope through the carnage of what seemed a thousand years; the hope which men, in their bewildered after-joy, were prone to call their luck. It was hope that went over the top with them, but it was luck that saw them through.

And so when he was turned away, empty-handed, from the place where he had proved his worth as a soldier of industry, he was not dismayed. He experienced a lively sense of indignation, he felt outraged, but he did not sit himself down over against the walls of Nineveh to devote a single hour to lamentation.

The injustice rankled. He had heard of other men coming back to find their places occupied by indispensables, but it had never occurred to him that *his* bosses would "welch" on their promise. He had never for an instant doubted, and yet when he was turned away he was not surprised. It seemed odd to him that he was not surprised. Perhaps it was because he had reached the point where nothing could surprise him. In any case, he strode out of the old familiar offices with his chin high, enjoying a very good opinion of himself and an extremely poor one of his late employers. It did not occur to him to feel the slightest uneasiness about the future. He would be no time at all in landing a good job with any one of the half dozen big concerns that

had tried in vain to get him away from the V—— Company. He would take his month or two of idleness down in the old town, where he could realize on the dreams and the longings that had never ceased to attend him, awake or asleep, through all the black ages spent in France.

This time there was no delegation at the station to meet him. Too many of Rumley's young men had preceded him home from the war. He was no better than the rest of them and deserved no more. His father and Sammy Parr were waiting for him when the train pulled in.

"By thunder, Oliver, it beats the dickens how you work into my plans so neatly," cried the latter. "You always seem to be coming home at the right minute. You couldn't have timed it better if you'd—oh, excuse me, Mr. Baxter, I forgot you hadn't—er, here's your father, Oliver."

Old Oliver came shuffling up from the background. He eyed his son narrowly.

"What's this, I hear about them not taking you back on your old job?" he demanded. He extended his hand, which young Oliver gripped in both of his.

"Aren't you glad to see me back, alive and well, dad?" he cried. "Not even scratched, or gassed or shell-shocked or anything. You act as though you—"

"Of course, I'm glad you're back, sonny—of course, I am. I've been praying for this ever since you went away. I don't see how on earth you ever escaped being killed. I—I guess it wasn't meant for you to die that way. Seems so, at any rate. But what did I tell you about them holding your job for you? What did I tell you? Didn't I tell you just what would happen? Didn't I say you'd never get it back? Didn't I say you were a fool for giving up a seven thousand dollar job to go over and mix up in a war that wasn't any of our business? Well, you see what's happened. Just what I said would happen. Here you are, a grown man, out of a job and probably won't be able to get one in God knows how long. I—"

"Oh, I'm not down and out, you know, dad," broke in young Oliver, slapping his father on the shoulder. "I've got quite a bunch of money in the bank and I've got my health and a few million dollars' worth of brains left. So, cheer up! I'm not worrying. I learned a long time ago how to land on my feet—and that's the way I'll land this crack."

"Course you're not worrying," was his father's sour retort. "You've got me to fall back on, with a good home and grub and a darned fine business to

drop into when I'm dead and gone. Four-fifths of the fellers who served in the army from this town alone are back here now, loafing and living off of their folks, and kicking like a bay steer because the government won't do something for them. I hope you ain't going to be one of that kind, Oliver. I hope to God you ain't."

His son could hardly believe his ears. He was bewildered, hurt.

"If you mean, dad, that I am counting on living off of you—of sponging on you—why, put it out of your mind. Nothing like that is going to happen. I did plan to stay a month or two, just for a rest and to be with you for a while—but if you'd rather have me beat it back to Chicago to look for a job, I'll only hang around a few days."

"I want you to stay here as long as you like, sonny," cried old Oliver, melting. "I don't want you ever to go away again. Maybe I sounded as if I did—but—but, I don't. I'm getting purty old—seventy-four last month—and I guess I'm not good for much longer. Don't you get it into your head that I don't want you to stay here in Rumley. Nothing would suit me better than to turn the business over to you right now and let me retire, but I guess it's not your idea to go into the retail hardware business."

"If you need me, dad, I—I will stay," said Oliver, swallowing hard.

"Oh, I don't need you yet," said his father, crusty once more. "I can get along, I guess. I've done it for a good many years, and I'm not all in yet, as the feller says. There was a time when I thought of selling out and moving into another state to live, but I've given that idea up."

"Still living in dread of what that darned old fraud said the day I was born, eh? Well, the agony will soon be over. A year and a half more, isn't it? That will end the tale, and I will live happily forever afterward."

Sammy Parr was consulting his vest-pocket note book.

"Just one year, six months and twenty-one days," said he.

"Good Lord, Sam! Have *you* gone off your nut, too?"

"Vital statistics, old boy. It's my business, you know. Come on; I've got my car out here. Your father's Ford died last fall and he's been an orphan ever since. Grab up some of this junk and I'll bring the rest. Never mind, Mr. Baxter. We can manage it."

"Drop me at the store," said old Oliver crossly.

Sammy gave young Oliver a significant look. “All right, Mr. Baxter. We’ll wait outside for you. I’ve got nothing but time on my hands to-day, and besides I want to talk to Oliver about a—er—something private.”

As the two young men hurried across the platform with the bags and bundles, Sammy found opportunity to say to Oliver:

“He’ll be in a good humor in a minute or two. It’s just a habit he’s fallen into since you’ve been away. I guess it’s that infernal gypsy business. He’s as peevish as blazes a good part of the time.”

They stopped in front of the Baxter store and the old man reluctantly got out of the car. It was plain to be seen that he had not intended to stop there at all but was now obliged to do so to save his face.

“I won’t be a minute,” he said, affecting a briskness that was calculated to deceive his son. Then he darted into the store, where, from a shadowy corner in the stove section, he shifted his uneasy gaze from the clock on the wall to the car at the curb.

“How’s your wife, Sam?” inquired Oliver.

Sammy grinned. “Little premature, ain’t you?”

“Premature?”

“Sure. I’m not going to be married till next week.”

“Oh, I say, old chap, I’m sorry. I hadn’t heard of Laura’s death. Her name *was* Laura, wasn’t it?”

“Yep. And it still is. But her last name isn’t Parr any longer. It’s Collins. We’ve been divorced for five or six months, Oliver. Don’t look so darned serious. I’m not sensitive. It’s the way things are done these days. Nobody gets married for keeps nowadays. It’s not supposed to be proper. The idea is to try it out for a year or so and if it doesn’t work, zing! You up and get divorced. Pretty much the same thing as an armistice. The war has changed everything. Quite a few old married people I know of are taking advantage of the new order of things. I’ve had to change the beneficiaries in four or five policies already. They’ve suddenly awoke to the fact that it’s easy. God knows where it will end. But I haven’t time now to tell you how Laura and I came to split up. Some other time, if you’ll just remind me of it. The question of the hour is, will you be best man again for me next week, old boy? I’m marrying the sweetest little woman that ever came down the pike, and this time it’s for keeps. No monkey business. Her first husband was a Lieutenant Higby—we were in the same camp for months and months.

That's where I met her. Well, he didn't appreciate her. That's the long and short of it. Got to running around after other women. She up and canned him. Long and short of it. Laura, God bless her, fell in love with a chap named Collins. I don't blame her, mind you—not a bit of it. She's as square as anything. Of course, it hurt my pride a little when she ran away with him—but it simplified matters. I'm sure you will like Muriel. She's as fine as they make 'em. We're to be married next Thursday afternoon. Up in the city. Her people live there. How about it? Will you repeat for me? I promise you it will be the last time, Oliver. Never again. We both know what we're about this time. We've cut all our wisdom teeth—and, by Gosh, if you ask me, I've had a couple pulled."

"We had a very jolly time at your first wedding, Sammy," sighed Oliver. "Jane was maid-of-honor and—well, I would have sworn that you two were the kind who would stick."

"So would I," agreed Sammy cheerfully. "We can't very well ask Jane to be maid-of-honor this time," he went on. "Religious scruples, you see. Minister's daughter. Wouldn't look right. I mean, wouldn't look right for her. But it's different with you. You haven't any religious scruples. What say? Will you do it?"

"Certainly. Rumley seems to be keeping up with the times, Sammy. When I was a kid, nobody ever dreamed of getting a divorce. It was looked upon as a—er—a sort of a crime."

"Still is by some of the old-timers," confessed Sammy. "Here comes your father. Don't say anything about me being married next week. I'm closing up a deal to renew his fire insurance to-morrow or next day, and if he knew I was thinking of committing bigamy next week, he'd turn me down cold. He calls it bigamy, you see."

"I see. By the way, where is Jane, Sammy?"

He remembered having asked that very question when he returned after a former protracted absence—and how many times had he asked it even before that? Every time he came home from college for a brief visit, every time he met Mr. Sage on the street—why, all his life he had been asking: "Where is Jane?"

"Jane Sage? Oh, she's around, same as ever. Things are a lot easier for Mr. Sage now. I guess maybe you haven't heard about his brother dying out in California and leaving him quite a bit of money. Yep. About a hundred thousand dollars, they say—safely invested, mostly at six per cent. The old

boy still sticks to his job as preacher, though. He's getting eighteen hundred a year now from the church. I'm glad of it. He gets a new suit of clothes every once in a while, and Jane doesn't have to make her own dresses as she used to. It looks like a pretty serious affair between her and Doc Lansing. Been going on now for nearly a year."

"What's that?" demanded Oliver, startled.

"I guess it's all happened since you went away. Why, sure it has. Doc's only been practicing here since last summer. Got hurt over in France in 1917 and had to take his discharge. Went over early in 'Seventeen in the Medical Corps. Leg smashed. Limps. Fine feller, though."

"I don't seem to remember him," said Oliver, dully.

"His father is president of the new bank here—that brick building down there at the corner of Clay and Pershing Streets."

"Pershing Street?"

"Yep. Used to be Ridley's Lane."

"Oh." Oliver was feeling a little like Rip Van Winkle. "You say she's—er—in love with him?"

"Looks that way," said Sammy, indifferently. "He's dead gone on her, that's sure. I had him in not long ago for the baby. He's all right. I forgot to tell you that the court gave the kid to me for eight months every year—four months to Laura. All right, Mr. Baxter. Hop in. I'll snake you home in no time. Hang on to your hat."

The volatile, insouciant Mr. Parr employed the correct word when he said "snake," for he wriggled a swift and serpentinous way through the traffic of Clay Street in his noisy red roadster, keeping up a running fire of conversation all the time, much of it being drowned by the louder fire of the muffler cut-out—which he used unsparingly in place of his horn in tight pinches.

"There's Jane on ahead," he sang out to Oliver as they whizzed across Pershing Street.

"Where?" cried Oliver, starting up.

"Back there," replied Sammy, with a jerk of his head.

Oliver twisted in the seat and looked over his shoulder. Jane was standing in the middle of the sidewalk, staring after the red roadster. He half-rose and waved his hand to her. She did not respond at once. The car

was swinging into a cross street before she recovered from her astonishment. Then she waved her hand—and the last he saw of her she was standing stock-still in the middle of the sidewalk.

"Say, what the—what's the rush?" he roared. "I want to speak to Jane. Stop the damn thing, will you? Let me out. I'll run back and—"

"Keep your shirt on," chirped Sammy. "I'll run you clear around the block and we'll head her off. Quicker than backing and turning in this—"

"Go ahead!" commanded Mr. Baxter sharply. "Let's get home. You can see Jane to-morrow or next day," he shouted to his son.

"Oh, I say, dad!"

"If you'd sooner see her than me—all right. All right! Turn around, Sammy, and take him back. Let me out. I'll walk the rest of the way home."

"Drive on, Sam," said Oliver, sinking back in the seat.

Presently Mr. Baxter cackled. He was in high good humor again. "Say," he said, "I fooled the whole crowd of 'em. I told Joe and the rest of 'em you wouldn't be coming down till to-morrow. Pretty smart trick, eh? Joe'll be so mad he'll pay me the twenty dollars he owes me, claiming he don't want to have anything more to do with me. He-he-he!"

Oliver was silent. Sammy snorted and then got very red in the face.

"I had to tell Serepty Grimes," went on Mr. Baxter, as if apologizing to himself. "She's keeping house for me now, and so I had to tell her. I didn't tell her till just about an hour ago, though. She was as mad as a wet hen."

"Aunt Serepta keeping house for you?"

"Yes. Have you got any objections?"

"None whatever, dad. I think it's great."

"Well," began the old man, slightly mollified, "I'm glad it suits you."

"I wouldn't have thought she'd give up her own nice little house to—Don't tell she's in financial difficulties, dad."

"She's better off than she ever was. She sold her house and lot and the Grimes sawmill two years ago, and now she's living off the fat of the land. She was the one who proposed the housekeeper scheme, not me. I tried to argue her out of it. Wasn't any use. I said that people would be sure to talk if she came over and lived at my house. Make a regular scandal out of it. But she just laughed and said nothing in the world would tickle her so much as

to have people say complimentary things about her at her age. I was a long time figuring out what she meant. She's sixty-nine. She says I ought to feel the same way about it, me being seventy-four. 'Let 'em talk,' says she, and after a while she got me to saying 'let 'em talk.' But the cussed part of it is, nobody thinks there's anything scandalous about it. There hasn't been a derned bit of talk. The only thing people say, far as I can make out, is that it's a mighty nice arrangement. What the dickens are you laughing at, Sam?"

"I just ran over a hen," lied Samuel promptly.

CHAPTER X

IDLE DAYS

June was well along before Oliver began seriously to contemplate bringing his self-styled "vacation" to an end. May had been glorious. Not since the year he left college had he known what it was to be idle and, in a manner of speaking, independent. He revelled in privileges that had been denied him for years—such as lying abed in the morning till he felt good and ready to turn out; strolling aimlessly whither he wished without troubling himself over the thought that he had to get back at a given time; loafing;—Lord, he couldn't remember that there ever had been a time when he actually enjoyed the dishonorable luxury of loafing!—on street corners, in Fry's drug store, in the public library, on friendly lawns and front porches; fishing, tramping, motoring, reading—all the things he had dreamed of in the black days across the sea.

The country was green and fresh and sparkling with the glories of a summer just taking over the heritage of a blithe and bountiful spring. The dust and grit of jaded August were still far enough away to be unconsidered; the roadside bushes and hedges, the trees and the grass were without the coat of gray that settles down upon them as summer ages; the brooks and the creeks were cool and laughing in a world of plenty, disdainful of the drought that was sure to fall upon and suck them in the blistering "dog days."

Even the sinister stretches of Death Swamp, across which he looked from the oak-shaded citadel that he would always call home, were not so repelling as they had been in days of yore. The pools, the hummocks, the patches of defiant reeds, the black shades of the quagmires seemed oddly to have lost much of their ugliness; the vastness that used to appall him was gone, just as the old church down the lane seemed to have shrunk from an immense, overpowering structure into a pitiful little shanty supporting a ridiculous little steeple. The swamp was green and almost kindly in its serenity; the wall of willows that surrounded it was greener still and no longer the horrifying barrier beyond which no man dared to tread; the soft blue of the June sky lay upon the still and supposedly bottomless pond in the middle of these useless acres.

But at night—ah, that was different! The swamp turned grim and dismal and forbidding. The grown man became once more the little boy as he looked out over the moonlit waste or tried to pierce its black shadows on a

starless night; the same old creepy sensations of dread and terror stole over him, and he who knew not the meaning of fear shivered.

During the first week he spent many happy, care-free hours with Jane Sage. They took long walks through country lanes, visited the old haunts he had known as smuggler, pirate and brigand, and marveled to find that they were still boy and girl. It was hard for him to believe that this tall, beautiful, glowing creature was the Jane Sage of another day, hard for him to realize that this ripe, mature, fully developed woman with the calm, clear eyes of understanding and the soft, deep voice, had once been a spindling, giggling girl in pinafores and pigtails, and later a half-formed maid in unnoticeable shirt waists and ill-hanging skirts. She reminded him that she was twenty-five. Why shouldn't she be grown-up at twenty-five? What was surprising in that? Everybody else grew up and got old, didn't they?

"Yes," said he, "but somehow you seem to have grown up differently from other people. As if magic had something to do with it."

"I was as grown-up when you went off to France four years ago as I am now. A girl doesn't change much between twenty-one and twenty-five, you know."

"Why, you were just out of short dresses when I went to France."

She laughed. "Shows what little notice you took of me," she gurgled. "And all the time you were over there you were thinking of me as an overgrown schoolgirl, I suppose. That is, if you thought of me at all."

"Oh, I thought of you a great deal. But you're right. I did think of you as you were when I went to Chicago to work—just a pretty, big-eyed, high-school girl with bony elbows and skinny arms—and you were as flat as a board. Why, good Lord, Janie, hasn't anybody ever told you that you're old enough to be married?"

"I am not without confidential friends," she replied demurely, a soft, warm flush spreading from throat to cheek.

This was in the first week of his visit. It was early evening and he lounged contentedly among cushions at the foot of the steps leading up to the parsonage veranda—an "improvement" that had followed close upon Mr. Sage's windfall. Jane sat on an upper step, her back against the railing, her legs stretched out before her in graceful abandon. The porch light behind cast its quite proper glow down upon the tranquil picture; it fell upon the crown of Jane's dark, wavy hair, scantily touching with shadowy softness the partly lowered face which, with seeming indifference, she kept turned

away from him. She was looking pensively down the dim-lit, cottage-lined street that cut through what once had been the barren tract known as Sharp's Field.

Oliver had fastened a sort of proprietory claim upon her as soon as he arrived in town. He took it for granted that old conditions had not been altered by the lapse of years nor by the transformations of nature; it did not occur to him that their relationship could or should be governed by a new set of laws.

And suddenly, on this quiet June evening, came the shock that put an end to the old order of things: the astonishing realization that Jane was old enough to be married! She was no longer a simple playmate. She was old enough to be somebody's wife—aye, more than that, she was old enough to be the mother of children!

He looked up at her out of the corner of his eye, as if at some strange creature that baffled his understanding. A woman! Jane Sage a woman! Yes, there was the woman's look in her thoughtful eyes, the woman's mold of chin and cheek and temple, the graceful curves of a woman's body, the round throat and the firm, shapely breast of glorious womanhood. A queer little thrill ran over him—the thrill of discovery. This was succeeded by a smarting sense of mortification which found expression in an apologetic murmur:

"And I've been behaving right along just as if you were still a blooming infant."

"Instead of a withering old maid," she remarked, affecting a lugubrious sigh.

"Oh, I say, you—why, hang it all, Jane, if you turn out to be an old maid I'll—I swear I'll not believe there's a God or anything. It would be monstrous—inhuman."

"Sometimes we can't help it," said she.

"It's darned hard for me to think of you as a grown woman, but it's even harder to conceive of you as an old maid."

"You're getting on in years yourself, old boy," said she tauntingly. "Aren't you afraid of becoming a crusty old bachelor?"

He did not answer. Apparently he had not heard her. He was deep in thought. After a long silence he spoke.

"What sort of a chap is Lansing, Jane?"

She started, and for a moment her eyes were fixed intently on his half-averted face. There was an odd, startled expression in them.

"He is very nice," she answered.

"So everybody says. He struck me as an uncommonly decent, high-minded fellow. Knows a lot more to-day, of course, than he'll know when he gets a little older. Just out of medical college, isn't he?"

"He was overseas in 1917," she replied, a trace of warmth in her voice. "He had been an interne for more than a year when he enlisted. He's young, of course—but we are all young once, aren't we? He is considered a very able—"

"Lord love you, Jane," he broke in hastily, "I'm not questioning his ability or his record. He's got a smashed leg to show for his work over there, and that's more than I've got. As for his—"

"You have two or three medals," she broke in softly. "You got them for bravery, didn't you?"

"No," he replied, shaking his head. "I got them for foolishness. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread! I had a fool's luck, that's all. The battlefields and trenches were full of dead men who ought to have had ten medals to my one. Lansing, for instance—wasn't he hurt in an air raid over a field hospital a few kilometers back of the lines?"

"Yes."

"I sometimes think, in fact, I know—that it takes more real courage to fight with your back to the enemy than it does to face him—if you see what I mean. It's much easier to be brave in the light than it is in the dark. Besides," he went on in his dry, whimsical manner, "you know which way to run if you can see the enemy coming toward you. And usually you run away from him a lot faster than you run toward him. I know I did."

"You used to be a very good runner," she said, smiling. "But that was ages ago."

"Ages," he agreed, and then both fell silent.

They watched the approach of an automobile along the tree-lined street. It slowed down as it neared the Sage home, coming to a stop at the front gate. Jane shifted her position quickly. She uncrossed her legs, drew them up into a less comfortable position, and attended to some slight though perhaps unnecessary rearrangement of her skirt. This action did not escape the notice of Oliver. It was significant. It established the line she drew between him

and other men. She didn't mind him and she did mind—well, say, Lansing, for it was the young doctor who clambered out of the car and came up the walk.

The house stood back a hundred feet or more from the street, so Oliver, recognizing the newcomer, had ample time to say to Jane, with a mischievous gleam in his eye as he looked up at her:

"Hullo! Here comes the doctor. Why didn't you tell me some one was sick in the house?"

"Sh! He will hear you," cautioned Jane, frowning at him.

"Bless your heart, Jane," he whispered impulsively, and again she looked at him in stark surprise.

Young Lansing walked with a slight limp. He was a tall, shock-haired, good-looking chap of twenty-five or six. He had the manner of one absolutely cocksure of himself—no doubt an admirable trait in one of his calling—and there were people who did not quite approve of him because he seemed to know as much as if not more than the old and time-tried practitioners of the town. He had new-fangled ideas, new methods, and he never by any chance so far forgot himself as to allude to an ailment or remedy in terms other than profoundly scientific. After hearing him classify your symptoms, it was impossible for you to deny that he was a young man of superlative attainments. But when you rushed around to the drug store with your prescription, believing yourself to be in the grip of a strange and horrific malady, and found that you had an ordinary sore throat and were to let the same old potash tablets dissolve in your mouth just as you had always done, you somehow felt that young Dr. Lansing was a trifle over-educated. He was, at twenty-six, what you would call bumptious. Nevertheless, he was a fine, earnest, likeable fellow—and even the most ignorant of patients would just as soon be ill in Latin as in plain English so long as he pulls through.

"Good evening, Jane," said he, as he came up to the steps. "How are you, Captain Baxter? Wonderful night, isn't it?"

"Wonderful," said Oliver, who wasn't thinking at all of the physical aspects of the night.

"Don't be a pig, Oliver," cried Jane. "Hand over a couple of those cushions to Dr. Lansing. You look like a Sultan completely surrounded by luxury."

"Don't bother," interposed Lansing hastily. "I shan't mind sitting here on the step. Doctors get used to—Oh, thanks, Captain. Since you force them upon me."

Twenty minutes later, Oliver looked at his wrist-watch, uttered an exclamation, and sprang to his feet.

"I must be going, Jane," he said. "Due at Sammy Parr's house half an hour ago. I'm standing up with him at his wedding to-morrow, Doctor. Marriage is a complaint you can have more than once, it seems. It's Sammy's second attack."

"No cure for it, I believe," said Lansing, arising. "Not necessarily fatal, however."

"If taken in time it can be prevented," quoth Oliver, airily. "The symptoms are unmistakable."

"Haven't you ever been exposed to it?" inquired Lansing, with a grin.

"Frequently. It takes two to catch it, though. That's how I've managed to escape. So long, Jane. I shan't see you again for a few days. Going up for the wedding to-morrow and expect to stay in the city for a day or two. Good night, Doctor."

He took himself off in well-simulated haste. He had not been slow to size up the situation. He was *de trop*. A certain constraint had fallen upon the young couple at the opposite side of the steps. He had sustained the brunt of conversation for some time, notwithstanding several determined efforts on Jane's part to do her share. Lansing seemed to have become absolutely inarticulate.

As he strode off down the street he was conscious of an extremely uncomfortable feeling that they were glad to be rid of him. Indeed, now that he thought of it, Jane had not seemed especially pleased when he dropped in shortly after supper. He recalled her long silences and the way she kept her gaze fixed on the street. Yes, they were glad to be rid of him. Any one could see that with half an eye. He smarted a little. It hurt him to think that Jane didn't want him around. Now that she was a woman she didn't want him hanging around. She wanted somebody else. Somehow it didn't seem natural.

But then, he philosophized, why wasn't it natural? She was old enough to be thinking seriously of getting married, old enough to have been in love a half dozen times or more—only he couldn't conceive of Jane being so silly and vacillating as all that—and she certainly had a right to be annoyed with

him if he came meddling around—He stopped short in his tracks, a queer little chill of dismay striking in upon him. For a moment he felt utterly desolate and bewildered. He felt lost. Why, it meant that he and Jane couldn't be playmates or chums any longer.

Without quite knowing what he was doing, he turned and looked back in the direction from which he had come. He saw the little red tail-light far up the street, standing guard, so to speak, in front of the parsonage. A red light signified danger. It means "steer clear," "go slow," "beware."

Jamming his hands into his pockets he resumed his way homeward, but now he walked slowly, his head bent in thought. Presently his face began to brighten, and soon he was grinning delightedly.

"Bless her heart," he was saying to himself. "It's great! What a mucker I am to begrudge her anything. I hope this guy is good enough for her, that's all. If he isn't—" here his face darkened again—"if he doesn't treat her right after he gets her, I'll make him wish he'd never been born." His cogitations became more expansive. After a while they led him to strong decisions. "It's up to me to give him a clear field. No butting in as if I owned the house and Jane and everything. It's all right for me to say I'm an old friend, and all that, but old friends can make damned nuisances of themselves. I know how I'd feel if I was in love with a girl and some idiotic old friend kept on horning in on everything. Why, I've been up at Jane's every night since I got to town—most of the afternoons, too. Monopolizing her. Making her unhappy. Making him—Yes, I've got to cut it out. It isn't fair. She's in love with him—at least, it looks that way. It's going to spoil my visit down here, but I've got to do it. The town won't seem natural or like home if I can't play around with Jane—but, my Lord, our play days are over. He seems like a decent chap. I wonder how Mr. Sage feels about it? Heigh-ho! It certainly does beat the devil the way the war has turned everything upside down. Nothing is the same. It never can be the same. Let's see—what did I say I had to do? Oh, yes—see Sammy Parr about something or other."

And yet, with the best intentions in the world, he was not allowed to carry them out. Jane had something to say about it. She met him face to face in the street three days after Sammy Parr's wedding, and looking straight into his eyes, asked:

"What is the matter, Oliver?"

"Matter?"

"Yes. What have I done?"

"Done?"

"Don't be stupid. Have I offended you? Why haven't you been up to see me?"

He decided to be quite frank about it. "I guess you know the reason."

"I don't know of any reason why you shouldn't come to see me, unless it's because you don't care to."

"See here, Jane, we've always been pals. I know you like me just as much as you ever did, and I'd jump off of that building over there head first for your sake. I don't know exactly how things stand with you and Lansing. I don't think you are engaged to be married. If that were the case, I'm sure you would have told me so, but—"

"We are not engaged to be married," she said quietly.

"I'm not going to ask whether you are in love with him. It's none of my business. It's pretty generally understood that he is in love with you. Let me finish. I will admit I've been making a few inquiries. I have found out that up to the time he came upon the field you had any number of young men calling on you—And I'll bet my head they were all in love with you. According to gossip, he seems to have the inside track—so much so, in fact, that all of the others have dropped out of the running. You see hardly any one now but Lansing. And so, while I'm not a suitor, it's only fair and square of me to keep out of the—"

Her free, joyous laugh interrupted him.

"Oh, you don't know how relieved I am," she cried. "I thought it was something really serious. Something I had done to offend you. So that's the explanation, is it? You wanted to give me every chance in the world to catch a beau—and to keep him. It's awfully kind of you, Oliver. Quixotic and silly and presumptuous—but kind. I am glad you've told me. As you say, it is none of your business. So I shan't burden you with my affairs. There is no reason why you should make me miserable and unhappy, however, just because you want to be what you call fair and square. It's just dirt mean of you, that's what it is. So now you know how I feel. Why, suppose I were in love with some one—even suppose I were engaged—is that any reason why the oldest friend I have in the world should turn his back on me and—"

"Now, now! Don't lose your temper, Jane!"

"I'm not angry. I'm hurt. You've been in love with loads of girls—heaven knows how many that I don't know anything about—but has that

ever made any difference in my friendship for you? Indeed it hasn't. You—"

"Then you *are* in love with Lansing?" he broke in recklessly.

"I haven't said so, have I? Besides there is only one person who has a right to ask me whether I'm in love with him or not and that is Doctor Lansing himself."

"That was one straight to the point of the jaw," cried he, with a grimace.

"So you needn't feel you are doing me a good turn by avoiding me," she went on. "On the contrary, you are putting me in an extremely unenviable position. What do you think people will say if you—of all persons—drop me like a hot potato and—"

"Now, listen, Jane," he began defensively. "I thought I was doing the right thing. You see, it isn't the same as it would be if I were a contender. Good Lord, can you see me standing aside in favor of another fellow if I was in love with you? I should say not! I'd stay him out if it took all night *every* night for ten years. But I want to play the game. Why, if I keep on coming to see you morning, noon and night, I'll scare Lansing off and he—he'll take to drink or something like that," he wound up whimsically.

"I don't believe even as redoubtable a character as you could scare him off, my dear Oliver," said she, not without a trace of irony.

"Well, anyhow—" began Oliver lamely—"anyhow, I've explained and it doesn't seem to have done a particle of good."

"Are you coming to see me?"

"Certainly. If you want me to."

"Just as if there were no such person as Dr. Lansing?"

"He isn't easy to overlook, you know."

"I dare say if I were to ask him to overlook you, Oliver, he would do it for my sake—with pleasure."

"Ouch!"

"When are you coming to see me?"

"This evening," said he promptly. "Unless you have a previous engagement," he hurriedly qualified in justice to his good intentions.

Jane smiled. "Doctor Lansing has quite an extensive practice," she remarked dryly. "He can't devote every evening to me, you know."

And so June drew toward an end with Jane and Oliver back on the old footing—not quite the same as before, owing to the latter's secret conviction that he was playing hob with the doctor's peace of mind, although that young gentleman failed surprisingly to reveal any signs of an inward disturbance. On the contrary, he didn't seem to mind Oliver at all—an attitude that was not without its irritations.

The "committee of three," satisfied that he was safe for the time being, adopted the welcome policy of letting Oliver alone. Joseph Sikes was so vehemently concerned over the Eighteenth Amendment that he had little time for anything else—not, he insisted, because he was a drinking man or that he couldn't get along without it, but because he had for once abandoned his own party and had weakly helped to elect men to a legislature that had betrayed the state into the hands of the "sissies." He invariably spoke of the "dry" advocates as "sissies."

Oliver's otherwise agreeable and whilom stay in Rumley was marred by his father's increasing despondency and irritation over the fact that he not only was out of a job but apparently was making no effort to obtain one. There were times when the old man's scolding became unbearable, and but for the pleadings of Serepta Grimes and the counsel of Mr. Sage, Oliver would have packed his bags and departed.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Oliver," begged Serepta. "He's cranky, that's all. He don't mean what he says. It would break his heart if you were to get mad and go off and leave him."

"But I can't stand being called a loafer, and a good-for-nothing, and a lazy hound, and—"

"You must overlook it, Oliver. He's old and he has worried so terribly over what that gypsy said—"

"All right—all right, Aunt Serepta," he would say, patiently. "I'll put up with it. I know he's fond of me. I wouldn't hurt him for the world. But sometimes it gets on my nerves so I have an awful time keeping my temper. How would you like to be called a long-legged sponge?"

He grinned and so did she. "I think I'd like it," chuckled dumpy little Serepta. "It would be stretchin' something more than the imagination to give me a pair of long legs, my boy."

"I'm not asking him for money," grumbled Oliver. "I've got a little laid by. Enough to tide me over for quite a while. He seems to think I'm scheming to get my hands on some of his. In fact, he said so the other day

when I merely mentioned that if I could scrape up a few extra thousand I could triple it in no time by draining all this end of the swamp and turning it into as fine pasture land as you'd find in the state. I even took him down to the swamp and showed him that it is possible and feasible. He called me a rattle-brained idiot."

"Well," said Serepta gently, "maybe you can carry out the plan after he is gone, Oliver. He's pretty old. He will leave everything he has to you when he dies. He is a very thrifty man and he has prospered. So you will be pretty well off."

"God knows I would like him to live to be a hundred, Aunt Serepta—so let's not talk of his dying."

CHAPTER XI

OLD OLIVER DISAPPEARS

Shortly before three o'clock on the afternoon of June 23rd; old Oliver Baxter stepped into the bank at the corner of Clay and Pershing streets and drew out thirty-five hundred dollars in currency. He gave no reason to the teller or to the cashier for the withdrawal of so large an amount in cash. He asked for a thousand in twenty dollar bills, the balance in fifties and hundreds. Receiving and pocketing the money, he strode out of the bank and turned his steps homeward.

His balance at the bank was a fairly large one. Moreover, he owned considerable stock in the institution. The Baxter Hardware Company was no longer an insignificant concern dealing in tools, tinware, nails; it was an "establishment." You could buy plows there; reapers, binders and mowers; furnaces and boilers, ice boxes and washing-machines; pots, kettles and cauldrons; stoves, ranges and brass-headed tacks; cutlery, crockery and stout hemp rope; step-ladders, wheel-barrows and glass door-knobs; log-chains, dog-chains and fly-wheel belts; coffee-mills, pepper-pots and bathroom scales; currycombs, skillets and housemaid's mops.

The staff consisted of three clerks and a book-keeper, and, now that farm machinery was included in the stock, an "annex" in the shape of a long corrugated-iron shed reached out from the rear of the store and took up all the available space between the Baxter Block and Stufflebean's Laundry on the north. People were right when they said that young Oliver would fall into a very snug little fortune—and a thriving, well-established business besides—when his father died.

Oliver October, ten or fifteen minutes late for supper that evening, found his father in a surprisingly amiable frame of mind. He was quite jovial, more like himself than he had been at any time since his son's arrival. He joked about old Silas and Joseph, teased Oliver about the extremely pretty Indianapolis girl who had come the week before to visit the Lansings, and exchanged pleasant jibes with Mrs. Grimes at the supper table, but said nothing about the money he had withdrawn from the bank.

It was a hot, still night, and there was a moon. On the front porch after supper he brought up the subject of draining the swamp. He said that he had given the matter a great deal of thought and was more or less convinced that

Oliver's plan was a good one. Mrs. Grimes triumphantly reminded Oliver that she had said, three weeks ago, that all he had to do was to give the family mule plenty of rope and he would quit balking in time—and hadn't it turned out just as she said it would? She left father and son seated on the porch and went off to spend the night with an old friend whose husband was not expected to live till morning.

Mr. Baxter's good humor did not endure. He revived a dispute they had had in the store earlier in the day—a one-sided quarrel, by the way, which his son had terminated by rushing out of the place with the words "Oh, hell!" flung back over his shoulder. The old man had that day offered him an interest in the business if he would remain in Rumley and take full charge of the store. Oliver was grateful, he was touched, but he declined the offer, saying he had a profession in which he wanted to make good; staying in Rumley would mean the end of all his hopes and ambitions. Mr. Baxter flew into a rage and his son, white with mortification, left the store, with that single, unguarded exclamation his only outward sign of revolt.

Mr. Baxter's reversion to the subject came when Oliver, looking at his watch, announced that he must be running along, as he was due over at the Sages to say good-by to Jane and her father.

"Well, I'll walk part of the way with you," said his father crossly. "I want to talk to you about the drainage scheme and—and, Oliver, I'd like to see if I can't coax you to change your mind about coming into the store. If you don't mind, we'll take the lower road along the swamp. It's a short-cut for you—saves you a quarter of a mile or more. I've been over the road several times lately, looking the land over, and I want to get your idea fixed in my mind. It's as bright as day almost. This may be the last night we'll ever spend together, so I—"

"Don't say anything like that, dad!"

"Never can tell. You may be sent off to some out-of-the-way place in the West—in case you get a job, which I doubt very much—and God knows whether I'll be here when you come back. Got to look these things in the face, you know. I'm seventy-five. If I do say it myself, a pretty good little man for my age—wiry as a piece of steel—but, as I say, you never can tell."

A few minutes before nine o'clock, Oliver October appeared at the home of the Reverend Mr. Sage, somewhat out of breath and visibly agitated.

"I'm awfully sorry to be so late," he apologized. "Father and I had a long and trying confab and I—I couldn't get away. He gave it to me hot and

heavy to-night, Uncle Herbert. The worst yet. God knows I hate to say it, but I'm glad I'm going to-morrow, and the way I feel now, I hope I'll never see the place again."

"No, you shouldn't say it, Oliver," said Mr. Sage. "Poor man, he is really not responsible these days. I wish you could see your way clear to remain here."

"You don't believe he is—unbalanced, do you? I mean out of his mind?"

"By no means. He is as sound as a dollar, mentally. But his nerves, my boy—his nerves are shattered. He thinks of nothing but the fate he believes to be in store for you. Every day is an age to him. You will not be thirty until a year from next October. Do you know how long that seems to him? Endless! You see, Oliver, for nearly thirty years he has lived in dread of—well, of the absurd thing that gypsy woman said. He tries to laugh it off, but I know it has never been out of his thoughts. Once you have passed your thirtieth birthday, he will be another man. He sleeps on thorns now. It is no wonder that he is cross and irritable and unreasonable. He is not deceived by the recent change of front on the part of Joe Sikes and Silas Link, both of whom now loudly profess not to believe a word of the fortune. He knows they are trying to cheer him up."

"He really is afraid that I am going to be hanged before I'm thirty?"

"I fear that is the case, Oliver."

"And that is why he wants me to stay here, so that he can watch over and protect me?"

"Exactly. Only he can not force himself to come out flatly and say so. He is ashamed to say it to you, Oliver."

"If I really believed that to be the case, Uncle Herbert, I—I would stay."

"It is the case, my lad," said the minister earnestly.

"I'll—I'll think it over to-night," said Oliver. "To-morrow I will put it up to him squarely. If he says he wants me to stay *for that reason*, I will chuck everything and—and go into the store."

"A year or so out of your life, Oliver, is a very small matter. But a year out of his is a great one, especially as it will seem like a hundred to him. Yes, my boy, think it over. And think of him more than of yourself while you are about it."

“I guess maybe I deserve that slap, Mr. Sage. It touched the quick, but—I guess I deserve it.”

He ran his fingers through his moist, disheveled hair—and then looked at them curiously. With his other hand he fanned himself with his straw hat.

Jane, who had been silent during the brief colloquy between her father and Oliver, was studying the young man’s face intently. She was puzzled by his manner and by his expression. He spoke jerkily, as if under a strain, and his lips twitched. She noticed that his shoes were very muddy.

“I came over by the back road, along the swamp,” he explained, catching her in the act of staring at his feet. “Father walked part of the way with me. He was pleasant enough to start off with, and I thought everything was all right between us, but when I told him I couldn’t reconsider—he went up in the air—and—Gee, what a panning he gave me! It was terrible, Mr. Sage. I saw red. I felt like taking him by the throat and choking him, just to make him stop abusing me. I—I had to run—I couldn’t stand it. God, how miserable I am!”

He put his hands over his eyes and his shoulders shook convulsively. Jane and her father looked on, speechless. After a few moments, Mr. Sage arose and, with a sign to his daughter, entered the house, leaving her alone with Oliver.

“Poor, poor Oliver,” she whispered, moving over close beside him on the step. “It is all so strange and unreal. He loves you. You are everything in the world to him. I can’t understand why he treats you like this. I—I wonder if he isn’t just a little bit unbalanced. He must be. He—”

“I don’t think he is,” groaned Oliver, lifting his head. “If I thought it was that, I’d put up with anything—I’d overlook everything. But your father is right. He’s as clear-minded as he ever was. He’s got it in for me for some reason and he—”

“If I were you, Oliver, I should tell him to-morrow that you intend to stay here and go into the store.”

“I don’t know that even that would help matters.”

“Try it, Oliver,” she said gently.

The clock on the town-hall struck twelve before Oliver reluctantly bade Jane good night and started homeward. Looking over his shoulder from the bottom of the lawn, he saw her standing on the steps in the glow of the

porch light. He waved his hand and blew a kiss to her. There were lights in Mr. Sage's study windows upstairs.

On his way home, through the heart of the town, he passed the rather pretentious house in which the Lansings lived. There were people on the broad veranda. He recognized Sammy Parr's boisterous laugh. He longed for the companionship of friends—merry friends. His heart was heavy. He was lonely. He turned in at the stone gate and walked swiftly up to the house.

"Hello, Ollie," called out Sammy. "Just in time to say good night."

Young Lansing came to the top of the steps to greet him.

"I've been up saying good-by to Mr. Sage and Jane. And the funny part of it is that I may not go away to-morrow after all," said Oliver.

Lansing started and gave him a keen, startled look.

"Has Jane persuaded you to stay?" he asked, after a slight hesitation.

"Not for the reason you may have in mind, old chap," replied Baxter, laying his hand on the young doctor's shoulder. "The Sages think I ought not to leave my father." He spoke in lowered tones, for Lansing's ear alone.

"I quite agree with them," said the other stiffly. "Jane has been talking to me about it. She said she intended asking you to change your plans."

"Mr. Sage opened my eyes to one or two things I haven't been able to see till now," said Oliver simply. "My place is here in Rumley, Lansing. For a year or two, at any rate."

They joined the group at the darkened end of the veranda. Sammy and his bride—a fluffy little giggler—were there; Miss Johnson, the girl from Indianapolis, and two other young men.

"No, thanks, Doctor; I won't sit down," said Baxter. "Just ran in to see if Sammy was behaving himself. And to tell you all that you will probably have me on your hands for a while longer."

"Good boy," cried Sammy.

"Lovely—perfectly lovely," shrieked the bride.

"If you had told me this morning, Mr. Baxter," said Miss Johnson coyly, "I shouldn't have telegraphed mother I'd be home day after to-morrow."

"Have a highball, Baxter?" asked Lansing suddenly.

“Not to-night, thanks. I’ve got to be running along. Father may be waiting up for me. Night, everybody.”

And he was off. The group watched him stride swiftly down the cement walk. Sammy was the first to speak.

“Well, I call that sociability, don’t you? What the dickens is the matter with him? First time I’ve ever seen Ollie Baxter with a grouch. A grouch, that’s what it was.”

“I don’t think it was very nice of him to come up here with a grouch,” complained the bride.

“I guess the crowd was too thick for him,” said one of the young men solemnly, and then winked at the girl from Indianapolis.

“He’s got something on his mind,” announced young Lansing, professionally.

“The old man, I guess,” said Sammy. “If my father behaved like old man Baxter does, I’d take him across my knee and spank him.”

Early the next morning, Serepta Grimes called Joseph Sikes on the telephone.

“Did Oliver Baxter stay all night with you?” she inquired. “I mean old Oliver.”

“No.”

“Have you seen anything of him this morning?”

“No. What’s the matter, Serepty?”

“Well, he didn’t sleep here last night, and there ain’t a sign of him around the place. I—I guess maybe you’d better come up, Joe.”

Old Oliver was gone.

“Off his base,” groaned Mr. Sikes, fifteen minutes after Serepta’s agitated call. He and Silas Link had hurried up to the Baxter home, where they found Mrs. Grimes waiting for them on the front porch. “I knew it would come. Off his base completely.”

“Wandered off somewheres,” groaned Mr. Link, very pale and shaky. “Maybe down into the swamp. My God!”

“Oliver October’s down there now,” said Serepta. “I got him out of bed a little after seven. He didn’t wait to put on anything except his pants and shoes. All I could get out of him was that the last he saw of his father was down on the swamp road about nine o’clock last night. Old Ollie walked a piece with him. Last Oliver saw of him, he was standing down there in the middle of the road.”

“Sure as shootin’!” gulped Mr. Sikes, sitting down heavily on the arm of a chair. “Out of his head. Wandering around. In circles. Dead, maybe. My God, Silas!”

“My God!” echoed Mr. Link, wiping the moisture from his forehead with a palsied hand.

Both of them looked helplessly at Mrs. Grimes. She too was pale but she was not helpless.

“Well, for goodness’ sake, don’t sit there like a couple of corpses,” she cried. “Do something. Get busy. Go look for him. Start—”

“Sure he’s not around the house or barn anywhere?” broke in Mr. Link, struggling to his feet.

“Maybe he fell down the cellar,” exclaimed Mr. Sikes, hopefully. “Or the cistern, or—”

“I’ve looked everywhere. He ain’t in the cellar or the cistern or the barn. I got here just about seven. Lizzie Meggs was getting breakfast. She was singing, happy as a lark. Did I tell you that Abel Conroy is still alive? Well, he is. I sat up with Kate Conroy all night, looking for him to die any minute. He—”

“Think he’ll pull through the day?” inquired Mr. Link, suddenly becoming an undertaker.

“Wouldn’t surprise me if he got well.”

“Good deal depends on how his heart holds out. Doc’ Williams was saying—”

“Oh, for the Lord’s sake!” boomed Mr. Sikes.

“As I was saying,” resumed Mrs. Grimes, “Lizzie was getting breakfast. I said I thought I’d go upstairs and lie down for an hour or two, and she says I’d better knock on Mr. Baxter’s door, ’cause she hadn’t heard him moving ’round, and his breakfast would be cold if he didn’t get a move on him. So I rapped on his door as I went by. Not a sound. I rapped again, and then I tried

the door. Then I went in. He wasn't there. His bed hadn't been slept in. So I called Oliver October. It's half-past eight now, and the boy's been down at the swamp for nearly an hour. Do something! Go out and help him look—"

"I'll take a look in the barn first. He may have gone up to the haymow to sleep," said Sikes, and shuffled off, followed a moment later by Silas Link, who had stayed behind long enough to instruct Mrs. Grimes to telephone to the police and to the railway station.

The long and the short of it was, Oliver Baxter had vanished as completely as if swallowed by the earth—and it was the general opinion that that was exactly what happened to him. There was not the slightest doubt in the minds of his horrified friends that he had wandered out upon the swamp and had met a ghastly fate in one of the countless pits of mire whose depths no man knew or cared to fathom even in speculation.

These soft, oozy, slimy holes were located at the lower end of the swamp, nearly a mile from the Baxter home. The upper end had long been looked upon as reclaimable through drainage, but that portion surrounding the pond was a hopeless morass. Scientific men advanced the opinion that ages ago a vast lake had existed in this region, covering miles of territory. Death Swamp was all that was left of it; the rest had dried up through the processes of nature. Tradition had it that the pond was without bottom, but science in the shape of an adventurous surveyor demonstrated that the water was not more than a few feet deep at any point. However, this same surveyor was authority for the statement that the mud at the bottom of the pond was so soft and unresisting that he could not reach solid ground with the twenty-foot fishing pole with which he was equipped.

There were the usual stories, some verified, of horses and other animals straying into the swamp and sinking out of sight before the eyes of their owners—disappearing swiftly in what appeared to be a patch of firm, reed-covered earth.

CHAPTER XII

ONE WAY OF LOOKING AT IT

Notwithstanding the almost universal belief that poor old Oliver Baxter was buried in the black mire of the Swamp—there were some who said he was still *sinking*—a state-wide search was at once instituted by his distracted son, who, for one, did not believe that the missing man had gone to his death in the loathesome tract. Before the sun had set on that bleak though sunlit day, telephone and telegraph wires carried the news to all nearby towns, villages and farms. Railway trains and interurban cars were searched; the woods and the fields for miles around were combed and the highways watched.

The bank's prompt announcement that Mr. Baxter had withdrawn thirty-five hundred dollars convinced Oliver October and a few sound-headed individuals that he had deliberately planned his departure from Rumley, although they were totally in the dark as to his reason for leaving—if, indeed, a reason existed in his disordered mind.

No one could be found who saw him after he took leave of his son on the swamp road. Oliver October related all that transpired between them on that moonlit by-way. He did not spare himself in the recital. No one blamed him, however. Much to his distress, Serepta Grimes came forward with truthful descriptions of scenes in and about the Baxter home; she told of old Oliver's inexplicable conduct, of violent fits of anger that grew out of nothing and died away in melancholy regret over the things he had said to his beloved son. And she described Oliver October as an angel possessing the patience of Job for having endured these outrageous "tantrums."

While neither Serepta nor young Oliver could be positive, they were of the opinion that Mr. Baxter wore his every-day business suit on the evening of his disappearance. Of this, however, they could not be sure. An inspection of his closet the following morning led to a puzzling discovery. A comparatively new suit of a dark gray material—rather too heavy for summer wear—was missing, while the wrinkled, well-worn garments that he wore daily at the store were found hanging in the closet alongside his venerable "Prince Albert." Mrs. Grimes was confident that he had on his old clothes at supper time; Oliver October had not noticed what he was wearing. In the event that Mrs. Grimes was right—and she couldn't take oath on it—Mr. Baxter must have returned to the house and changed his clothes after

parting from his son. There was no one at home. Lizzie, the most recent maid-of-all-work, was at the "movies," and Mrs. Grimes was "sitting up" with Abel Conroy.

The excitement in Rumley was intense. The Baxter home became a magnet that drew practically the entire population of the town to that section, and there was not an hour of the day that did not see scores of people trudging through the safer portions of the swamp or tramping along the uplands that bordered it. Small children, accompanied by their parents, stared wide-eyed and frightened across the loathesome tract, and listened to solemn warnings which generally began with "poor old Mr. Baxter wandered out there and that was the last of him." Venturesome young men approached a few of the "holes," sounded them with poles and saplings, and came away shaking their heads.

Three or four days passed before towns far and near began to report that old men answering the description sent out by the Chief of Police in Rumley were being detained or kept under surveillance, pending the arrival of some one who could identify them as Mr. Baxter. Oliver October, Sammy Parr and other citizens sped in haste to these towns, only to meet with disappointment. Finally the tenth day came and the nine days of wonder were over. People began to think and talk about something besides the Baxter mystery. Detectives from Chicago, brought down by Oliver October, agreed with the young man that his father had "skipped out," to use the rather undignified expression of Mr. Michael O'Rourke. It was Mr. O'Rourke who advanced the theory that the old man had taken this amazing means of forcing his son to remain in Rumley.

"Why," said he, "it's as plain as the nose on your face. He is dead set on having you stick to this town. He chews it over with you for weeks. You say 'nix.' Nothing doing. Well, what's the smartest thing he can do? What's the surest way for him to bring you to time? He's as slick as grease, your father is. Out of his head? Not on your life. He's an old fox. Do you get me? The only way to make you stay in this town is for him to leave it.

"He draws a wad of money, puts on his best clothes, and—fare thee well! He sneaks off without letting anybody know where he's going. Why does he do that? Simple as A B C. If you or anybody else knew where he was or where he was even likely to be, you'd have him back here in no time, and all his trouble for nothing. He thought it all out beforehand. Knew exactly where he was going and how to get there without being headed off. And that's where he is right now, leaving you to hold the bag. He's had his own way. You've got to stay here until he gets good and ready to come back.

See what I mean? Somebody's got to be in charge of his affairs. The store and everything. There is a chance, of course, that he wandered out in the swamp, as most of these people think, but I don't believe it. He wouldn't draw out thirty-five hundred dollars if he had any preconceived notion of doing away with himself. And he wouldn't come home and put on his best suit of clothes, either. It's possible, to be sure, that he was slugged by somebody who knew he had all that money and his body chucked into the mire. It's up to you, Mr. Baxter. If you want us to go ahead and rake the country for him, we'll do it. I don't say we'll find him. We're an honest concern. We don't believe in robbing our clients. It will cost you a lot of money to find him, Mr. Baxter. Besides, there's always the chance that he'll lose his nerve and come back home. Or he may get sick and send for you. We've had hundreds of these mysterious disappearance cases and more than four-fifths of 'em don't amount to anything."

"I want to find him," said Oliver firmly. "You may be right in your surmise—I hope you are. But just the same I don't intend to leave a stone unturned, Mr. O'Rourke. As long as I've got a cent of my own, I'll keep up the search, and when my money runs out, I will use his. Good God, when I think that he may have wandered off only to fall into the hands of thieves and cutthroats, I—I—No, we must find him, do you understand? Find him!"

"He's all right as long as he don't let some guy sell him the Field Museum or the Woolworth Building," said the detective easily. "All right, sir. We'll get on the job at once. Hold yourself in readiness in case we need you in a hurry. I suppose we can always get in touch with you here, Mr. Baxter?"

Oliver nodded. "Yes. You can always find me here in Rumley."

And so the days ran into weeks and the weeks into months, with the mystery no nearer solution than in the beginning—no word, no sign from the old man who had vanished, no clue that led to anything save disappointment. There was something grim, uncanny about the silence of old man Baxter—it was indeed the silence of the dead. "He might as well be dead," was a remark that became common in Rumley whenever his case was discussed. Strangely enough, no one now believed him to be dead. Everybody agreed with the detective that the cantankerous old man had "skipped out" with the sole idea of frustrating his son's plan to return to Chicago.

"What gets me," said Joseph Sikes, "is the underhanded way he went about it. Leaving Oliver and all the rest of us to worry ourselves sick and

him just calmly settling down somewheres in peace and comfort and maybe snickerin' to himself over the way he put it over on us. It wasn't like him, either. I never knew a more upright man, or anybody as square and above-board as Ollie Baxter."

Not once but a dozen times a day Mr. Sikes held forth in some such manner as this, ignoring Mr. Link's contention that poor old Ollie may not have been responsible for his act, "owing," said he, "to a sudden mental aberration." Young Dr. Lansing spoke of it as "aphasia," which was doubted with scornful determination until the word was reduced to "loss of memory" by several family doctors who stood well in the community.

Oliver October took charge of the store and, as self-appointed manager, conducted the business to the best of his ability. He deferred to the older clerks and the book-keeper in matters of policy, an attitude which not only surprised but pleased them. Charlie Keep, the senior clerk—a man who had been in the store for twenty years—was so inspired and relieved by this self-effacement that he speedily proclaimed Oliver October to be a better business man than his father.

There was nothing in the young man's manner to indicate that he rebelled against the turn in his affairs. On the contrary, he took hold with an enthusiasm that left nothing to be desired by those who at first shook their heads dubiously over the situation.

"I am to blame for all this," he protested firmly. "If my father is dead, I am accountable for his death. Whatever his present condition may be, I am responsible for it. Don't put all the blame on that gypsy fortune-teller. I should have realized the state of mind he was in and I should have given up everything else in the world to help him weather the next year or so of doubt and distress. I laughed at his fears. I did not understand how real they were to him. He wanted me here where he could watch over me. Mr. Sage believes he has buried himself in some out-of-the-way place where he can't even hear what happens to me between now and my thirtieth birthday. Uncle Joe Sikes says he got cold feet—couldn't stand the gaff. That's another way of looking at it. In either case, I honestly believe he will come back in his own good time. And when he does come home he must find me here, carrying on the business as well as I know how. I will do more than that. I'll drain part of our bally old swamp and make it worth fifty dollars an acre to him instead of the dreary waste he bought for a song. And I sha'n't stop looking for him—not for a single minute. It's all right to be optimistic, it's all right to assume that he is safe and well somewhere, that he knows what

he is about, and all that. The reverse may be the case—so I mean to find him if it is humanly possible to do so."

Joseph Sikes and Silas Link lamented and at the same time excoriated old Oliver Baxter. For a while the latter spoke of his old friend as "the deceased," being in no doubt at all as to his fate, but, as time went on and the "remains" continued to elude the most diligent of searchers, he was forced to admit that perhaps everybody else was right and he was wrong.

Accepting the increased burden of responsibility resulting from old Oliver's defection, the two "guardians" devoted themselves, without a murmur of complaint, to the supervision of Oliver October's private and personal affairs. It was a duty that could not be shirked—a charge bequeathed to them, so to speak, by the figuratively demised Mr. Baxter. They had little or no support from Mr. Sage; and when they complained to Serepta Grimes about the minister's lack of interest in the young man, that excellent manager shocked them by declaring that if they bothered her with any more of that nonsense she would give them a piece of her mind and a kettle full of boiling water besides.

They turned to Jane Sage for comfort, and while that young lady smilingly called them a couple of "dear old geese" it was so much more poetic than Mrs. Grimes's "idiotic old jackasses" that they forthwith accepted her as an ally and from that time on went to her with all their troubles—dubiously and shamefacedly at first, to be sure, but with a confidence that soon developed into arrogant assurance. She confided to Oliver October that they nearly bothered the life out of her, and begged him, for her sake, to smile more frequently than he did—(Mr. Sikes dwelt mournfully upon what he called Oliver's "hang-dog" expression)—and to stop haranguing the members of the common council about the defects in the city drainage system—(Mr. Link said that it wasn't right, the way he lost his temper when discussing the conditions, and besides nobody else had ever found any fault with the sewers in Rumley); and never to so far forget himself as to again threaten to sue George Henley if he didn't settle his account of four years' standing; and by all means to refrain from arguing politics with Justice of the Peace Winterbottom, because neither Mr. Sikes nor Mr. Link slept very well after listening to these heated debates.

"Poor old Janie," Oliver would say, with his always engaging grin. "I'll bet you wish I was safely past thirty."

"I do that," she would always respond, very much as Biddy McGuire, the Irish washwoman, might have said it.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GOOD SAMARITAN PAYS

The winter wore away, spring came and quickly melted into summer; the first anniversary of the unexplained disappearance of Oliver Baxter passed. Three months remained of the last year allotted to Oliver October by the gypsy "queen" on that wild, shrieking night in 'ninety. He was still alive and thriving, and the shadow of the scaffold was as invisible as on the day the prophecy was uttered.

But by this time practically everybody in Rumley was counting the days and jokingly reminding Oliver that his chances got better every day!

He grinned and suggested that the town ought to put up a stupendous calendar in front of the city hall and check off each succeeding day, so that the public could keep count with the least possible tax on the mind.

"I feel like a freak in a dime museum," he said to Jane one evening. "What you ought to do at the lawn fête next week, Jane, is to put me in a little tent and charge ten cents admission to see the man that the hangman is after. You'd raise enough money to wipe out the entire church debt. Think it over."

He had just returned from a hurried trip to Nashville, Tennessee, where an old man was being held—a queer old tramp with a prodigious Adam's apple, who refused to give any account of himself. This was but one of the fruitless journeys he had taken during the twelve-month.

"I see by the paper this evening that your Uncle Horace has announced himself as a candidate for State senator," said Mr. Sage, who was enjoying his customary half-hour on the porch with them.

"Well, I know one vote he will not get," said Oliver, "even if he is my uncle."

"I know of another," said the minister dryly.

"The nomination is equivalent to an election," said Oliver. "There hasn't been a Republican elected in this county since the Civil War, they say. If the old boy can buy the nomination he won't have to spend a dollar getting elected."

“It is not my habit to speak unkindly of my fellow man,” said Mr. Sage, “but I find it quite a pleasure to say that I look upon Horace Gooch as the meanest white man in all—er—I was on the point of saying Christendom, but I will say Hopkinsville instead.”

“Why, Daddy, I am really beginning to take quite a fancy to you,” cried Jane delightedly. “Only last week you said he ought to be tarred and feathered for turning those two old women out of their house over at Pleasant Ridge.”

“But he didn’t turn them out,” said Oliver quickly. “Somebody came along at the last minute and lent them the money to redeem their little house and farm. They’re as safe as bugs in a rug and as happy as clams.”

“You don’t really mean it, Oliver?” cried Mr. Sage. “That is good news—splendid news. It seemed such a heartless perversion of the law that those poor, frail, old women—both over seventy, by the way—should lose their all simply because they had to let their property go at tax sale. Horace Gooch has become rich off of just such delinquent tax-payers as these unfortunate old women. I am not saying it is illegitimate business—but he has acquired quite a lot of good real estate in this way. I rejoice to hear that some one has come to the rescue of Mrs. Bannester and her sister. I suppose they had to give their benefactor a mortgage on the property, however,—and that may ultimately afford some one else a chance to squeeze them out of their own.”

“I understand it was a loan for something like twenty years, without interest,” said Oliver.

“Bless my soul! Practically a gift, in that case. It is unlikely that they will live to be ninety.”

“I wonder how Uncle Horace felt when they popped up the other day, just as he thought he had the tax deed in his hand, and redeemed the property,” mused Oliver, chuckling. “I’ll bet it hurt like sin. Even a shark can suffer pain if you stick him in the right place. He had his heart set on that property, Uncle Herbert. The Interurban line is figuring on putting up an amusement park out that way, and I happen to know they’ve had an eye on the Bannester place, with its big oak trees and a wonderful place for an artificial lake. He could have cleaned up a lot of money on it.”

“I hate that old man,” cried Jane.

“My dear child, you must not—”

“When I think of how he behaved after Mr. Baxter went away, and the things he said to Oliver when Oliver refused to help pay for the monument

his uncle had erected on his own cemetery lot up at Hopkinsville, because Mr. Baxter's sister was buried there—his own wife, if you please, Daddy—well, when I think of it I nearly choke. I won't allow you to say I sha'n't hate him. I just adore hating him and I—"

"My dear, I had no intention of saying you shouldn't hate Mr. Gooch," broke in her father. "I was merely trying to say that you must not speak so loud. Some one outside the family circle is likely to hear you."

"I've always said you were a corking preacher, Uncle Herbert," announced Oliver.

"Thank you," with the lift of an eyebrow. "No doubt I have improved somewhat with age."

"I'd give a lot to know just what you said to old Gooch, Oliver, when he came to see you about the monument last fall," said Jane, invitingly.

"I was mighty careful, I remember, to see that there were no ladies present at the time," chuckled Oliver. "And besides, I've been trying ever since to forget what I said to him. But it's absolutely impossible, with Uncle Joe dropping in every day or so to remind me of it."

"I hope Mr. Gooch hasn't been allowed to forget it."

"Jane, my dear, you really are becoming quite a vixen," remonstrated her father.

An automobile came to a sudden stop in front of the house, and an agile young man leaped out, leaving his engine running. He came up the walk with long strides.

"Say, Oliver, you old skate, I've been looking all over town for you," shouted Sammy Parr. "This isn't your night to call on Jane—don't you know that? You're supposed to be either at the Scotts', billing with Amy Scott, or at the Ridges', cooing with that new girl from Boston, and listening to her talk about Harvard all the time. Say, I've been over to Pleasant Ridge this afternoon—good evening, Jane—to see Mrs. Bannester and her sister about some fire insurance—Evening, Mr. Sage. Nice evening—And, say, they told me all about you, you blamed old skate—I mean Ollie, not you, Mr. Sage. Gee whiz, Ollie, you certainly did throw the hooks into Uncle Horace this time, didn't you? You certainly—"

"Shut up!" growled Oliver, scowling fiercely at the excited Sammy.

"Shut up? Why should I shut up? Why the hell should I—beg pardon, Mr. Sage—excuse my slippery tongue. My Lord, boy, the boom has already

been started. You can't head it off. I didn't lose a minute getting over to the County Chairman's office and telling him the whole story. The boom's on! He nearly hit the ceiling for joy. My God, if we can only keep all this quiet till after the Democratic convention—and old Gooch is nominated—we'll spring something—Gee whiz! Listen to me barking loud enough to be heard in Hopkinsville. Fine guy, I am, to talk about keeping it quiet. Say, we've got to talk in whispers from now on—whispers, see?"

As he planted himself down on the step, he delivered a mighty, resounding slap upon Oliver's knee.

"Aw, cut it out—cut it out," grated Oliver. "Keep your trap closed, can't you?"

"What on earth are you talking about, Sammy?" cried Jane.

"He's talking through his hat—"

"Out with it, Sammy, out with it," counseled Mr. Sage, coming down the steps.

Oliver groaned: "Oh, good Lord, deliver me!"

"Say, what do you think, Mr. Sage—what do you think? Why, this chump here is the guy that lent Mrs. Bannester the money to—"

"See here, Sam—this is my affair," broke in Oliver gruffly. "It's nobody's business but my own. I made 'em swear on a stack of Bibles they'd never tell—"

"Don't blame them—don't blame those nice old women," broke in Sammy sternly. "It was not their fault. I put one over on 'em. I told 'em there was some talk of that check being phony and they'd better—"

"It wasn't a check," said Oliver triumphantly. "It was cash—currency."

"That's what they came back at me with, but I said I meant counterfeit and not forgery—slip of the tongue and so forth. That got 'em. They up and said they had known Oliver October Baxter since he was knee high to a duck, and—"

"Oh, Oliver!" cried Jane. "Did you really do it? I could squeeze you to death for it. And you never told me—you never breathed a word—"

"It was only about a thousand dollars," mumbled Oliver. "And a little over," he added quickly, noting Sammy's expression. "It was my own money. I could do what I liked with it, couldn't I? They used to bring eggs and butter and chickens and everything to my mother, and when she was

sick they had me out to their farm and made me awfully happy and—But that's neither here nor there. It was a low-down trick of yours, Sam, to—"

"Sure it was," agreed Sammy cheerfully. "But right there and then the destiny of the great American nation was shaped along new lines. Right then and there, Mr. Samuel Elias Parr saw a great light. The words were no sooner out of the mouth of old Mrs. Bannester—or maybe it was her sister—it doesn't matter—when the boom was born! Yes, sir, the boom was hatched and—but, my God, we mustn't—oh, excuse me, Mr. Sage, I keep forgetting that you—"

"Pardon me, Sammy, but I am really quite curious to know why you apologize to me for your profanity and not to Jane, who, I assure you, is a young lady of considerable refinement and—"

"That's all right, sir," Sammy assured him glibly. "I've got Jane covered with a sort of blanket apology—something like a blanket policy. Good for any time and any place. But as I was saying, we mustn't let Joe Sikes and Silas Link get wise to all this. They'd raise Cain—spoil everything gabbing about that gypsy's warning or whatever it was. Now, if we are foxy, we'll catch the Democrats napping and, gee whiz! what a jolt we'll give 'em next November! We'll run four thousand votes ahead of Harding himself and—"

"Oh, for the Lord's sake, Sammy, slow down! Put on your brakes! What the dickens are you driving at, anyhow? Boom? What boom?"

"Your boom, you idiot! The boom's been started for you as Republican candidate for State senator against old man Gooch. It's under way—nothing can head it off, absolutely nothing but death or an earthquake. The County Chairman hit the ceiling. He told me he'd call a meeting of—"

"Why, you darned chump," roared Oliver. "I'm not going to run for State senator or anything else. You must be crazy. You've got a lot of nerve, you have. What right have you to start a thing like this without consulting me? You'll just make a monkey of me, that's all you'll do—and of yourself, too. I'll head it off to-morrow. I'll telephone—"

"Won't do you a darned bit of good," cried Sammy exultingly. "They'll nominate you, anyhow. Why, my Lord, they've got to nominate *somebody*, haven't they? They do it every election year, don't they? Just as a matter of form? But, great Scott, here's the chance for them to *elect* somebody in this county. You don't suppose they're going to miss a chance like this, do you? Popular young soldier, medal man, celebrated football player, renowned engineer, youthful philanthropist, successful business man, unsmirched

character—why, you're the only Republican in this county that would stand a ghost of a show, Ollie. And best of all—popular nephew running against Shylock uncle! Gee whiz! Normal Democratic majority of three thousand wiped out—in spite of prohibition—and—Senator Baxter, of Rumley, ladies and gentlemen!"

Even Oliver October laughed.

"By jingo, Sammy, you're doing your level best to have me put my neck in the noose, aren't you?" he exclaimed.

"Noose nothing!" exploded Sammy. "I thought about all that. You can't possibly be elevated to a position in the halls of State or Nation until next November, you chump—and you'll be thirty in October, won't you? Well, that settles that. Puts the kibosh on that gypsy dope. Well, so long! I've got to be on the jump. I just thought I'd run up and tell you, so's you'd know what's what. I'm going down to see Al Wilson at the *Despatch* office. Put him wise and warn him not to let a word of it leak out in the paper till he gets the word. Night, Mr. Sage—so long, Jane."

"Wait a minute!" called out Oliver, springing to his feet as Sammy darted down the walk.

"Nix!" shouted Sammy over his shoulder.

The three of them watched him in silence as he leaped into his car and began his swift, reckless turn in the narrow street.

"Sorry!" he yelled out to them. "Had to take off a little of the turf, but this street needs widening, anyhow."

"What are you going to do about it?" inquired the minister, the first to speak.

Jane did not give Oliver a chance to reply. Her eyes were blazing with excitement and there was a thrill in her voice that caused Oliver to laugh outright.

"Do about it?" she cried. "Why, he's going to run against old Gooch and beat the life out of him!"

"Daughter!"

"Oh, my goodness! I'm so excited! Oliver, you're a darling for helping those old women out—and you never intended to say a word about it! It was heavenly! And you will go to the State Legislature, and then to Congress, and—Goodness knows how high up you may go!"

Oliver's smile broadened. "And the Gypsy Queen be hanged," quoth he.

Jane caught her breath. A startled look flashed into her eyes and was gone.

"The Gypsy Queen be hanged!" she echoed stoutly. "Long live the King!"

Oliver was still looking up at her. She stood at the top of the steps, the light from the open door falling athwart her radiant face, half in shadow, half in the warm, soft glow. Suddenly his heart began to pound—heavy, smothering blows against his ribs that had the effect of making him dizzy; as with vertigo. He continued to stare, possessed of a strange wonder, as she turned to her tall, gray-haired parent and laid both hands on his shoulders.

"I wish I could say 'gee whiz' as Sammy says it," she cried. "I feel all over just like one great big 'gee whiz.' Don't you, Daddy?"

The man of God took his daughter's firm, round chin between his thumb and forefinger and shook it lovingly. "One 'gee whiz' in the family is enough," said he. "I am glad you feel like one, however. You take me back twenty-five years, my dear. Your mother used to say 'gee whiz' when she felt like it. It is, after all, a rather harmless way of exploding."

"I know—but don't you think it is wonderful?" she cried. "I mean, Oliver going to the Legislature and—"

"Whoa, Jane!" interrupted Oliver, a trifle thickly. He wondered what was the matter with his voice. "Steady! Sammy's crazy. I wouldn't any more think of letting 'em put me up for—why, gee whiz! It's too ridiculous for words."

Her face fell. "I must say I like 'gee whiz' only when it expresses enthusiasm," she said. "It's an awful joy-killer, the way you used it just then, Oliver."

"I don't want any politics in mine," he stated, almost sullenly. Then brightly: "If I had to choose between the two, I'd sooner go in for religion."

Mr. Sage smiled. "If more clean-minded, honest fellows like you, Oliver, were to go into politics, there wouldn't have to be so many preachers in the land."

"What chance has an honest man got in politics, I'd like to know?"

"The same chance that he has in the church. The people want honest men in politics, just as they demand honest men in their pulpits."

“That’s all right, sir, but it’s easier to be good in a church than it is in a barroom—and that’s just about the distinction.”

“You forget we’ve got prohibition now,” said Jane, ironically. “There isn’t a barroom in the whole United States and there isn’t a single drop of intoxicating liquor.” She laughed derisively.

“Not a drop,” he agreed, rolling his eyes heavenward. Then he quoted incorrectly. “ ‘Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink.’ That’s what the good and honest men did to politics. They fixed it so that there isn’t anything in the country to drink except booze.”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Mr. Sage.

“Tell me how you came to go to the assistance of Mrs. Bannester and her sister—tell me everything,” said Jane, resuming her seat on the step.

“There isn’t anything to tell,” said Oliver. “I just went out to see them and—that’s all there is to it.”

“Oh, indeed!” she scoffed. “You just went out there and said ‘howdy-do, ladies; here’s a couple of thousand dollars—and good-by, I must be getting home.’ ”

“I stayed for dinner,” he admitted. “They always have fried chicken and white gravy when I go to see them. And waffles and honey. I’m very fond of honey.”

“Don’t you want to tell me, Oliver?” There was a hurt note in her voice that shamed him.

“Well,” he began awkwardly, “I’d been thinking about it for some time—their troubles, I mean. I couldn’t stand seeing them kicked off their place. I had the money, and I didn’t need it. So I—I made ’em take it. Yep—I just *made* ’em take it. They were awfully nice about it. If Uncle Horace ever finds out that I lent them the money, he’ll—” He broke off in a chuckle of sheer delight. His eyes were full of mischief. “I’ll never forget the time I let him have it with my marbles. Gee, it was great!”

“Wouldn’t it be glorious if we could always stay young and throw marbles at the people we don’t like?” cried Jane.

“The only drawback is that sometimes you can’t find the marbles again. I lost two of my finest agates that day.”

“You young savages!” exclaimed Mr. Sage, with mock severity. He said good night to Oliver and, murmuring something about next Sunday’s

sermon, entered the house. They heard him go slowly up the stairs.

CHAPTER XIV

JEALOUSY WITHOUT LOVE

"Did you notice, Oliver, that he spoke of my mother a little while ago?"

"Did he?"

"Certainly. You must have heard him."

Oliver was silent. He was wondering how long that strange, unaccountable blur had lasted.

"It was the first time he has spoken of her in years," she went on, her brow puckering. "It seemed to slip out when he wasn't thinking, when he wasn't on guard."

"It slipped out because he was thinking, Jane," said Oliver. "That's just it. He is always thinking of her. What was it he said?"

She told him.

"I wonder if I remind him of her in lots of ways," she mused.

Oliver's thoughts leaped backward a score of years and more. "I used to think she was the most wonderful person in all the world," he said. "I was very desperately in love with your mother when I was six or seven, Jane." He hesitated and then went on clumsily, almost fatuously: "I am beginning to think that you are like her in a lot of ways."

She gave him a quick, startled look. His face was turned away, and so he did not see the tender, wistful little smile that flickered on her lips, nor was he aware of the long, deep breath she took. From that moment a queer, uneasy restraint fell upon them. There were long silences, dreamy on her part, moody on his. He left shortly after ten; his "good night" was strangely gruff and unnatural.

He was jealous. He knew it for a fact, he confessed it to himself for the first time openly and unreservedly. He was jealous of young Lansing. There was no use trying to deny it. He did not go so far as to think of himself as being in love with Jane—that would be ridiculous, after all the years they had known each other—but he bitterly resented the thought that she might be in love with some one else. Especially with the superior, supercilious, cocksure Lansing!

Why, if she were in love with Lansing—and married him!—good Lord, what a fool he had been to think it would make no difference to him! It would make a difference—an appalling difference. All nonsense to think she wouldn't go out of his life if she married Lansing or any one else. Of course she would. He felt a cold, clammy moisture break out all over him; a sickening sensation assailed the pit of his stomach. She would have a home in which he could be nothing more than an old friend; he would have to submit to being governed by certain conventions and by an entirely new set of conditions; her husband would have a lot to say about all that; it would mean that he couldn't drop in every night or so for an intimate chat, that he couldn't go strolling freely and contentedly into familiar haunts with Jane, that he couldn't take her off for rides in his car, or up to the city to see the plays. Lansing wouldn't stand for that! Nor would any one else! It would be the end of everything, his life would have to be reordered, his very thoughts subjected to a drastic course of inhibitions, he would have to stand afar off and wait for some other man to beckon for him to approach! Unbearable!

What was it that Sammy said—in jest, of course, but now heavy with portent? "This isn't your night to call on Jane," or something like that. It was Lansing's night! The whole town knew it was Lansing's night—and he was calling on Jane because Lansing happened to be off in the country seeing a patient.

This was what all his good offices had come to, this was what had come of his idiotic, vainglorious desire to do the right thing by Jane! He had simply let himself in for a lot of unhappiness. Strange, though, that he should be so consumed with jealousy when he wasn't the least bit in love with Jane himself. It was absurd! Why, he had known her since the day she was born—how could he possibly be in love with her when he had known her all her life? He knew what love was—yes, indeed, he knew. He had been in love half a dozen times. He ought to know what love was—and certainly his feelings toward Jane were nothing like those he had experienced in bygone affairs of the heart. Gee whiz! What had suddenly got into him?

Suddenly it came to him that he was selfish. That's what it was—selfishness. He did not want her himself and yet he couldn't bear the thought of letting some one else have her. Utter selfishness! Having arrived at this conclusion he smote his conscience heroically and proclaimed to the night that he would no more be jealous. Not even of Lansing. He would go on being Jane's friend, and Lansing's friend, and the friend of their children, and—This brought him up with a blinding jolt. Jane's children! And Lansing's! Something red and strangely sustained blurred his vision.

He was oppressed by a feeling of almost intolerable loneliness as he strode down the dimly lighted street; a soft breeze blowing through the leaves of the young maples overhead suggested subdued, malicious laughter; automobile horns sounded like raucous guffaws; some blithering idiot was sounding taps on a mournful cornet far off in the night. He was going to lose Jane—he was going to lose Jane—he was going to lose Jane. Over and over again: he was going to lose Jane. Taps!

Clay Street was almost deserted. The stores were closed for the night. A few pedestrians strolled leisurely along the sidewalks; a small group of loafers in front of Jackson's cigar store, a detached policeman, three young girls waiting on a corner, widely separated automobiles drawn up to the curb, a man studying the billboards outside the closed door of the Star Moving Picture Palace. The town clock began to strike eleven.

"Gee whiz!" sighed Oliver October, for all the world seemed as bleak to him as Clay Street was at midnight.

Not since that night in June, over a year ago, had he taken the "short cut" swamp road on his way home from Jane's. He avoided it after dark as if it were a graveyard—and he always hurried a little in passing a graveyard at night. He had never gotten over childhood's fear of the ghosts that were supposed to come out and wander among the cold, white tombstones. There were no tombstones along the lonely swamp road, but he had a dread of it just the same.

He sat on his porch until long past one o'clock, lonelier than he ever had been in his life. The night was warm, somber; a light wind crossing the expanse of swamp land brought a whiff of comfort and with it the incessant chatter of frogs, the doleful hoot of owls and the squawk of nightbirds prowling in the air. The house was dark, still. He felt very sorry for himself, sitting there all alone. How different it was over at Mr. Sage's house—the friendly lights, the cozy comfort of everything, the companionship—some one to talk to and laugh with, and some one to feel sorry for him, instead of the other way about. To-morrow night would be Lansing's night—and soon, perhaps *every* night.

"I ought to get married," he mused in his dejection. "It's the only thing. Have a wife and a home and children. But, good Lord, where am I to find a girl I'd want to be tied to all my life? I've had it pretty bad two or three times, but, here I am, not caring a darn about any one of 'em. I might just as well never have known them. It wasn't the real article—not by a long shot. There are mighty few girls like Jane in this world—mighty few. The man

who gets her will get one in a million. And where would a chap find a father-in-law like Uncle Herbert? It makes me sick the way Lansing twists that beastly little mustache of his and looks bored every time Uncle Herbert speaks. Funny Jane doesn't see it and call him down for it. And why the devil doesn't Uncle Herbert see it and tell Jane she'll never be happy with a fellow like Lansing? Good Lord, is everybody blind but me?"

The next morning he was down at the swamp bright and early, inspecting the work of the ditchers and tile layers. The task of reclaiming the land had been under way for several months and was slowly nearing completion.

"I wish you'd change your mind about not going out any farther, Oliver," said old John Phillips, who was superintending the work. "We could go out a quarter of a mile farther without a bit of risk, and you'd add about twenty acres of good land to—"

"We'll have enough, John," interrupted the young man. "We'll stick to the original survey. Don't go a rod beyond the stakes I set up out yonder. It may be safe but it isn't worth while."

"Well, you're the boss," grumbled old John, and added somewhat peevishly: "I'll bet your father wouldn't throw away twenty acres or more just because—but, as I was saying, Oliver, you're the boss. If you say I'm not to go beyond them stakes, that settles it. But I can't help saying I think you're making a mistake. There's some mighty good land there, 'spite of them mudholes a little further out."

"I'm not denying that," said Oliver patiently. "But we'll stop where the stakes are, just the same."

A few minutes later old John confided to one of the ditchers that young Baxter was considerable of a darned fool. Either that, or else he had some thundering good reason of his own for not wanting to go out beyond the stakes.

"This here job has cost up'ards of three thousand dollars already, and for a couple of hundred more he could clean up clear to the edge of the mire, and when his pa comes back—if he ever does come back—he wouldn't have to take a tongue-lashin' for doin' the job half way. I used to look upon that boy as a smart young feller. And him a civil engineer besides."

"Maybe he's a whole lot smarter than you think," said the ditcher significantly.

"Oh, I don't for a minute think it's that," said old John hastily. "Not for a minute."

“I can’t help thinkin’ we’ll turn up that old man’s body some day. It sort of gives me the creeps. Bringin’ up them horse’s bones last week sort of upset me. God knows what else may be out there in the mire.”

The two big ditches, fed by lateral lines of tile, held a straight course across the upper end of the swamp and drained into Blacksnake Creek, a sluggish little stream half a mile west of Rumley. Roughly estimated, three hundred acres were being transformed into what in time was bound to become valuable land. The time would come when it could be successfully and profitably tilled. Farmers who had scoffed at the outset now grudgingly admitted that “something might come of it.” A far-seeing man from the adjoining county made an offer of ten dollars an acre for the land before the work had been under way a month. He said he was taking a gambler’s chance.

Oliver was walking slowly back to the house, his head bent, his hands in his pockets, when he observed an automobile approaching over the deeply rutted, seldom traveled road. He recognized the car at once. Lansing’s yellow roadster.

He frowned. Lansing was the one person he did not want to see that morning. He had lain awake for hours, seeking for some real, definite reason for hating the man—and to save his life he couldn’t think of one! And he knew that when he looked into the young doctor’s frank, honest eyes this morning, and saw the genial, whole-hearted smile in them, and heard his cheery greeting, the elusive reason would be farther from his mental grasp than ever. He simply couldn’t help liking Lansing.

The car came into plain view around a bend in the road, and he saw that a woman sat beside the man at the wheel. His heart contracted—and as suddenly expanded. It wasn’t Jane.

“Hello, there!” called out Lansing, while still some distance away.

Oliver, peering intently through the flickering shadows of the woodland road, saw that the doctor’s companion was a stranger. A young woman—and an uncommonly pretty one he was soon to discover. He stepped off into the rank grass at the roadside and the car came to a stop. He took off his “haymaker’s” straw hat, and revealed his white teeth in the smile that no one could resist. The young woman smiled in return, and then flushed slightly.

“You’ve heard me speak of my sister, Oliver,” said Lansing, resting his elbows on the wheel. “Well, here she is. Meet Mr. Baxter, Sylvia, as we say

out here. Mrs. Flame, Oliver. You needn't be afraid of her, old man. She's quite flameless. Got rid of him last month in Paris. Come a little closer."

"Don't be silly, Paul," scolded Mrs. Flame. "Mr. Baxter may have a perfect horror of divorced women."

"I have," said Oliver gallantly. "I shudder every time I see one. If I hear about 'em in time, I shut my eyes so that I can't see them. But when I'm taken by surprise like this, I stare rudely, my knees quake and I begin to pray for help. It's queer I never feel that way about divorced men. I don't have the slightest fear of them, no matter how big and strong and ferocious they may be. Strange, isn't it?"

"Very," said she, still smiling down into his eyes. "I must say, however, I don't think you are staring rudely."

"It's generally conceded that he stares very handsomely," said Lansing. "But, hop in, Oliver. I've been sent to fetch you over to Mr. Sage's. He had a cablegram early this morning and sort of went to pieces. Jane sent for me. He's all right now, but Jane says he wants to see you. She telephoned while I was there, but you were not at home."

"A cablegram? His wife—is she dead?"

"I should say not. She's sailing for the United States to-morrow and is coming here to live!"

"Good God!" burst involuntarily from Oliver's lips.

"It's knocked the old boy silly," was Lansing's brief and professional explanation. "Climb in here beside Sylvia—plenty of room if we squeeze. Get your leg over a little, Sylvia. That's all right. Shall we stick to this road, Oliver, or go back to the—"

"It gets better a little farther on," said Oliver, dazed. "All the hauling has been at this end. My Lord! No wonder he's knocked out. Coming here to live? Why—why, he hasn't seen her since Jane was a baby. What's the matter with her? Sick?"

"I don't think so. Unless you can see something ominous in the last line of her cablegram. She winds it up with 'dying to see you.' Strikes me she's been a long time dying. They say she turned this burg upside down when she first came here. Do you remember her, Oliver?"

"I should say I do," cried Oliver. "I adored her. I say, this must mean that she's going to leave the stage, give up acting. She was famous over there. Why, only a couple of years ago, she made a great hit in a new play over in

London. I tried to get across from France to see her in it, but it couldn't be managed. Just after the Armistice, you see. I asked a good many British officers about her. They said she was tophole, all of 'em crazy about her. I can't understand it, Doc. Coming here to Rumley to live? Gee whiz!"

"I saw her in a play called 'Rosalind,' " said Mrs. Flame. "Several years ago. It's by Shakespeare. My husband said she certainly was worth seeing. Heavens, Paul, take these ruts slowly. You're jolting my head off."

After a long silence: "When did you get here, Mrs. Flame?" inquired Oliver briskly.

"Last night. Paul met me in Hopkinsville. I came direct from New York. My home is in New York City, you know. I've never been in Rumley before. We were living in Indianapolis when I was married. That was seven years ago. Seems seven hundred. Now you know almost all there is to know about me."

Oliver was staring straight ahead. He was wondering if "Aunt Josephine" could still turn "cart wheels," and make up funny songs, and dance on the tips of her toes. Hardly. She must be over fifty. Then he came out of his momentary abstraction and politely asked Mrs. Flame when she had arrived in Rumley.

"I mean," he stammered, "how long do you expect to be here?"

"Ten days, or two weeks at the longest," she replied. "I am joining a house party at Harbor Point."

"Good!" he exclaimed, and then as she looked at him quickly: "I mean, I'm glad you're going to be here that long. By George, this will make a thundering difference in the lives of Mr. Sage and Jane. Is—is Jane excited, Doc?"

"Nothing like the old man. He keeps saying over and over again, with a smile that won't come off, that if you pray long enough and hard enough, you'll get your wish, or something like that."

"What does he want to see me about?"

"Search me. Ouch! Excuse me, Sylvia. I didn't see it."

"Oh, don't mind me. I'm used to hard knocks," gasped the young woman.

Oliver turned his head to look at her. She was very pretty and very smart looking in the little brown hat that sat jauntily upon her yellow, beautifully

coifed hair. Very trig, too. About thirty-two or-three, he hazarded. Fine eyes—a trifle pained at present, but fine, just the same. He found himself wondering if Jane was as pretty as Lansing's sister—and suddenly it occurred to him that Jane had her "lashed to the mast"—absolutely!

The road got better. "Your ears must have burned last night, Mr. Baxter," she said.

He started guiltily. "How—what for?" he stammered.

"Old Paul here did nothing but talk about you all the way down from Hopkinsville. I don't see how you've done it. He's usually quite a snob, you know. I've never known him to like anybody but himself before. You must be either superlatively good or superlatively bad. Which is it?"

"Depends entirely on which you prefer, Mrs. Flame," said Oliver coolly.

"I guess that'll hold you, Syl," cried Lansing.

Oliver groaned inwardly. It was getting more difficult every minute to hate the fellow.

CHAPTER XV

THE THIRD FAIR LADY

Two old men were crossing Maple Street as Lansing swung into it from the dirt road. They quickened their steps and from the safety of the sidewalk glanced at the occupants of the car.

"Wasn't that Oliver October?" demanded Mr. Sikes, pursuing the car with an outraged gaze.

"It was," replied Mr. Link, putting his hand to his side. "He yelled at us. Lordy, I'm too fat to hurry like that." He strode on a few paces before discovering that he walked alone. Mr. Sikes had stopped stock-still and was gazing blankly after the receding roadster. "Come on! What's the matter with you?"

"Say, did you notice? Did you notice that woman sitting on his lap?"

"She wasn't doing anything of the kind. She was sitting between 'em."

"Well, anyhow, this settles everything," said Mr. Sikes weakly. "He's as good as hung right now. Absolutely."

"What the—"

"Say, are you blind? Can't you see *anything* at all?"

"I can see a darned sight better than you can, and you know it," retorted Mr. Link hotly. "You can't see ten feet in front of you. How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Oh, go to thunder! What I'm asking you is, did you notice her?"

"Certainly—that is, I noticed the back of her head."

"Well, what color was it?" demanded Mr. Sikes.

"I didn't notice," said Mr. Link.

"You didn't, eh? Of course, you didn't. The only way you ever notice anything is when I tell you to notice it. It was yaller."

"Yaller? Well, what of it?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing at all," exclaimed Mr. Sikes, throwing up his hands in a gesture of supreme disgust. "Nothing at all, except she's the third

yaller-haired one to come into his life. The one that was here last fall that he took such a shine to, and the one he confesses to being gone on out in Idaho or somewheres. Two dark and three fair women, is what she said. Didn't she? Wait a minute! Answer me. Didn't she?"

"She did," said Mr. Link, his brow clouding. "But he's only had one dark one, far as we know," he added hopefully. "That girl he says he was engaged to over in China."

"What do you call Jane Sage? You wouldn't call her a blonde, would you?"

"Certainly not. But what's Jane got to do with it?"

"She's got a lot to do with it. She's a dark woman, ain't she?"

"Not especially. Brown or chestnut, I'd say."

"Well, say *bay*, if you want to," roared Mr. Sikes. "And I'll tell you something you don't know about Jane. She's in love with Oliver, and always has been."

"Go on!"

"That makes her one of the dark women, don't it? And she makes two, don't she? And this here new one—the one that was setting in his lap—she makes the third fair one, don't she? Well, what you got to say to that? This is the last straw. I been prayin' to God that we could get through the year without another light woman turning up. And here she comes, right when everything was looking safe. I—"

"He won't take any notice of this yaller-haired girl," said Mr. Link, with an air of finality. "I can tell you something about Oliver that you don't know. He's in love with Jane, as the saying is, and always has been."

Mr. Sikes stopped again in his tracks and glowered at Mr. Link. "Who told you that?" he demanded.

Mr. Link took time to search several tree tops before answering. Then he solemnly said: "I'm not sure it was the one I see perched over yonder at the top of that second tree, but if it wasn't that one it was one just like it. A little bird told me."

"Talk sense! Who told you Oliver was in love with Jane?"

"Doc Lansing. Not more than a week ago he told me Oliver was head over heels in love with her. I guess he ought to know. He sees a good deal of both of 'em."

"Well, I'll be—Why, dod-gast it, he's the one that told me Jane was in love with Oliver."

"Well," began Mr. Link after they had proceeded up Maple Street some fifteen or twenty paces, "if he's telling the truth, I guess you don't need to worry about this yaller-haired one any longer, Joe."

Mr. Sikes shook his head. "I'm not so sure about that. He's partial to blondes, seems to me. I'll have to talk to that boy, Silas. I've told him a hundred times to beware of light women, and here he goes—"

"Come on! Oliver got out of the car up in front of the Reverend Sage's and it's going on without him. That proves we're right, Joe. That telegram to Reverend Sage was—"

"It wasn't a telegram. It was a cable. Marmaduke Smith told me; not five minutes after he delivered it."

"No matter. It's from Ollie. He's telegraphing Sage to break some kind of news to Oliver. Dying somewheres maybe. That's why they sent Doc Lansing for Oliver October. Come on—step along a little, Joe. I think I've sized the thing up. The minute I heard Sage had got a telegram I says to myself, it's from Ollie. I—"

"If you save your breath you can walk faster," interrupted Mr. Sikes, stepping forth with renewed vigor. Mr. Link was half a block in the rear when his companion turned in at the parsonage.

It was true that Josephine Sage was coming home. The beatific minister thrust the cablegram into Oliver's hand as that young man came bounding up the veranda steps.

"She's coming on the *Baltic*. I have decided to go to New York to meet her. Jane will accompany me. I wish you would find out for me, Oliver, when the *Baltic* is due to arrive at New York. I am so upset, so distracted I do not seem to know just which way to turn. Please help me out, lad. Perhaps I should have telegraphed myself—or had Jane do it—but we—I mean *I*—er—"

"Don't you give it another thought, Uncle Herbert," cried Oliver, returning the bit of paper which Mr. Sage carefully folded and placed in his notebook. "I will arrange everything for you. You must be beside yourself with joy, sir. It's great, isn't it? Where is Jane?"

Mr. Sage looked a trifle dazed. "Why—er—oh, yes, she is upstairs putting a few of my things into a suitcase. I—"

Oliver laughed. “For the love of—Why, Uncle Herbert, you’ve got five or six days to spare. The *Baltic* won’t reach New York for a week anyhow.”

“A week?” in dismay. “Of course! I must be losing my mind. Of course! I seem to remember Jane saying something of the kind a little while ago. Yes, yes! But I do wish you would run along and send the telegram. Do you happen to know of a nice quiet hotel there? Perhaps you wouldn’t mind telegraphing for accommodations for Jane and me. And will you see about reserving something on the train for us? I have done so little traveling of late years, I—”

“Say, you ought to come out in the back yard and put the gloves on with me, Uncle Herbert,” cried Oliver, with sparkling eyes. “I’ll bet you’re twenty years younger than you were yesterday, and I’ve an idea you could plaster it all over me.”

“I—I believe I could,” said Mr. Sage, squaring his thin shoulders and drawing a deep breath. “I—I feel like a—a fighting-cock!”

CHAPTER XVI

MR. JOSEPH SIKES INTERVENES

Now, while Mr. Joseph Sikes was one of the first citizens of Rumley, a good Republican, and a man whose opinions were considered if not always respected, he had no social position, using the term in its present accepted sense. In simple, he was not by way of knowing the "best" people. There had been a time when Joe Sikes was a figure in the social life of Rumley, but that was in the days when "society" functioned, so to speak, in the corner grocery, or on the porch of the toll-gate, or at K. of P. Hall. Conditions in Rumley had changed, but old Joe hadn't. He was still a "feed store" man, fairly prosperous, blatantly independent, and on speaking terms with "fashion" only in connection with business or politics.

The day was past in Rumley when Joe Sikes could stroll up to anybody's house, night or day, walk in without knocking, and feel at home with his friends. There were eight or ten thousand people in Rumley now and there was a distinct though somewhat heterogeneous element known to some as the "smart set" and to others as the "stuck-ups." They were the people whose names and activities filled the society columns of the Rumley *Daily Despatch*.

To them, old Joe Sikes was a "character." He knew Banker Lansing, and Banker Koontzwiler, and the President of the Excelsior Woodenware Works, and others of their ilk, but he did not know their wives or their daughters. Mr. Link, on the other hand, had a very wide acquaintance with the "newer rich," as he learnedly called them in placating Mr. Sikes on occasion. He had buried a lot of them, for one thing.

Mr. Sikes was troubled. Not once but half a score of times in the week following his first glimpse of "yaller-headed" Mrs. Flame, he had seen her with Oliver October. She wasn't, of course, sitting in Oliver's lap on any of these occasions, but—well, it is enough to say that Mr. Sikes was sorely troubled. He saw Oliver going straight to his doom.

With Jane's departure for New York he lost all hope.

He had lectured Oliver severely, and, to his grief and astonishment, was laughed at for his pains. So he went to Serepta Grimes.

He rang the Baxter doorbell—and instantly wondered why he had done so. It seemed like a confession of weakness on his part. He sat down on the veranda and waited. It was late in the afternoon of a hot July day, well along toward the end of the month. He sniffed the sultry air, gazed frowningly at the western sky where clouds were gathering in the black pregnancy of storm, and chewed hard on the macerated stub of an unlighted cigar.

Mrs. Grimes came to the door.

"Oh, it's you, is it? I thought maybe it was Marmaduke Smith back with another telegram."

"Another what?" demanded Mr. Sikes, with interest.

"He's brought two up on his bicycle since four o'clock, and he said maybe there'd be more. Two telegrams for Oliver."

"Why didn't he take 'em to the store, the little fool? Oliver may have to ketch the six o'clock train. What's in 'em?"

"How should I know? I don't open his letters or telegrams."

"Well, you'd ought to. Ten chances to one they're from Ollie, asking for help or money or—Where is Oliver, if he ain't at the store?"

"He's out automobile riding with Mr. Lansing's daughter."

"Oh; he is, is he?" snapped Mr. Sikes, getting up. "I might have knowed it. Darn his eyes, he's getting worse and worse every day. If I've warned that boy once about light women, I've done it a hundred times. He's got to—"

"She's letting it come in dark again," said Mrs. Grimes calmly.

"Letting it what?"

"Come in dark. Her hair, I mean. She wouldn't be any more of a blonde than you are, Joe Sikes, if she'd quit bleaching her hair, or hennering it, or whatever it is they do. Like Saul Higbee's daughter Kate—you remember her, don't you? Turned blonde over night, and said God had performed a miracle."

"You mean to say this here Lansing woman ain't a real blonde?" exclaimed Mr. Sikes, sitting down again.

"You heard what I said, didn't you?"

"I don't know whether to believe you or my own eyes."

“Looks as if we’d get the storm before dark, doesn’t it?” said Mrs. Grimes, sweeping the cloud banks with a casual eye.

Mr. Sikes appeared to be thinking. After a long pause he said: “I guess maybe you’re insinuatin’ that I better be moving along towards home if I don’t want to get caught in it.”

“You can sit here as long as you like, Joe,” said she. “And you can stay to dinner, too, if you feel like it,” she added, her conscience smiting her suddenly.

“Have you swept the porch to-day, Serepty?” he inquired, after another pause.

“Certainly. Why?”

“Because I never seem to come up here and sit down on it but what either you or Lizzie Meggs rush out and begin sweeping all around me. No matter what time of day I come, I always have to get out of the way of one of you women sweepin’.”

“Well, you won’t have to to-day,” said she good-naturedly. “So set still.”

“I guess I’ll wait for Oliver to come home,” said he guiltily. “I want to see what’s in them telegrams. You—you’re sure about that woman having dark hair?”

“Absolutely.”

“Well, that’s a comfort. I—Hello! Here comes Oliver now—but, by thunder, he’s got that yaller-haired woman with him,” he concluded in dismay. “No, thank you, Serepty—I can’t stay for supper. I—I—” He got up quickly, pulled his straw hat down low over his eyes, and started hurriedly down the walk.

“Hello, Uncle Joe,” called out Oliver, swinging the car into the drive. “Wait a minute and I’ll give you a lift home. I’m going back just as soon as I’ve changed my collar and—”

“There’s a lot of telegrams here from your father,” said Joseph gruffly. He halted half way down the walk and stared intently at Mrs. Flame.

Oliver brought the car to a stop in front of the porch. “I’ll be out in a couple of minutes, Sylvia,” he said as he slid out from behind the wheel. “Hey, Uncle Joe! Come here, please. I want to introduce you to the lady you’ve been raising such a rumpus about. She swears she won’t scratch your eyes out or pull your hair. You needn’t look so scared. She’s perfectly

harmless. Take my word for it. I've had experience with fair women, as you well know, and I don't find 'em any more devilish than dark women."

Mr. Sikes was scandalized. He turned purple in the face—not with anger but with mortification. He told Mr. Link afterwards that he felt like a fool, and Mr. Link brought a lot of wrath down upon himself by remarking that it must have been wonderful for him to feel natural for once in his life.

He approached the dazzling, radiant Mrs. Flame reluctantly, stammering something about "horse play" and "poppycock."

"Do you think there is going to be a storm, Mr. Sikes?" she inquired, as Oliver, grinning maliciously, dashed up the steps and followed Mrs. Grimes into the house.

Mr. Sikes did not answer at once. He was squinting narrowly at Mrs. Flame's back hair—or more particularly at a spot just below the left ear.

"By jiminy," he muttered softly, "she's right." Then recovering himself, he said: "Eh?"

"Mr. Baxter is a great tease, isn't he?" she substituted.

"He's a darned nuisance," said Mr. Sikes sharply. "Makes me tired." Suddenly it occurred to him that here was a chance not to be overlooked, so he added very firmly: "I pity the woman that gets him for a husband."

"You do? Why, I should say that the woman who gets him is about the luckiest person in the world."

He looked at her piercingly. "How long did you say you've knowed him?" he inquired.

"I didn't say—but there's no harm in telling you, I suppose." She began counting on her fingers. "Nine days, Mr. Sikes."

"It takes him just about that long," was his cryptic rejoinder.

She laughed merrily. "Do they fall for him as easily as all that?"

"The married ones do," said he darkly and daringly.

"Oh, that lets me out," she said. "You see, I'm not married, Mr. Sikes."

"Excuse me, I thought he said Missus," floundered Mr. Sikes, a trifle dashed.

"He did. I am Mrs. Flame."

"Er—ahem! Oh, I see. Widow."

“In a detached sort of way.”

This was beyond Mr. Sikes. “In the war, I suppose.”

“Do I look like a woman who lost a husband in the war, Mr. Sikes?”

“You don’t look like you’d lost one anywhere,” said he, beginning to feel a trifle nettled. “You certainly don’t look like a widow to me.”

“What do I look like to you?” she inquired amiably.

“You look as if it wouldn’t distress you very much if I was to ask how long he’s been dead,” was his unexpected reply.

She flushed. “A very good answer to a very stupid question,” said she. “He isn’t dead. He is very much alive. He didn’t go to the war. I am one of those horrible, unspeakable things known as a grass widow, Mr. Sikes.”

“As I was saying,” he began after he had taken as much as thirty seconds to recover from the shock of this disclosure, “it wouldn’t surprise me if we got the storm inside of ten or fifteen minutes. I guess I’ll be moving along. Glad to have met you, Mrs.—”

“Do wait,” she cried. “Oliver won’t be a minute. We’ll take you wherever you wish to go, Mr. Sikes.”

“No, I won’t wait,” said he firmly. “But before I go, I want to—er—as I was saying, it ain’t any of my business—you understand that, don’t you?—er—I was just thinking it’s only fair to tell you that Oliver is—er—what you might call engaged, Mrs. Flame. Generally speaking, I mean.”

“I see,” said she brightly. “And you want to warn me not to make a fool of myself, is that it? It’s awfully kind of you.”

Mr. Sikes was a poor dissembler. “Well, I was thinking more about Oliver making a fool of himself,” said he bluntly.

“But why, Mr. Sikes, do you keep all this a secret from him?” she cried, biting her lip to keep from laughing. “I think you ought to tell him he is engaged and not keep the poor boy in suspense. He hasn’t the remotest inkling of it.”

“Don’t you fool yourself,” said he stoutly.

“And who is the fortunate young lady?”

“We ain’t quite ready to make it public yet,” said Mr. Sikes, casting a sharp look toward the house and cocking his ear for sounds of Oliver’s

footsteps on the stairs. “Which reminds me,” he went on hurriedly, lowering his voice, “I guess you’d better not mention it to him.”

“I sha’n’t, Mr. Sikes, if it will make you feel any more comfortable. But at least you can tell me this. Does the young lady know she is engaged?”

He had got in deeper than he intended.

“Did I say she was young?” he demanded craftily, trying to recall just how far he had already committed himself. “No, siree! You bet I didn’t. I’m too smart for that.”

“But does she know she is engaged?” persisted this disconcerting young woman.

“Not what you would call exactly,” he confessed, lamely.

“I see. You are keeping it a secret from both of them.”

He heard Oliver in the hall, speaking to Mrs. Grimes. It was no time to choose words, so he blurted out:

“Yes, and you’ll do me an everlastin’ favor, ma’am, if you’ll keep it secret from him for a week or two. He’s awfully touchy. It might spoil everything if he got wind of it.”

“Is she a blonde or a brunette?”

This was his chance. “It’s purty hard to tell these days,” he said, fastening his gaze on her hair in a most disconcerting manner.

She laughed outright, joyously, frankly. Oliver, coming out of the house at this juncture, paused in amazement at the top of the steps.

“See here, Uncle Joe, you quit your flirting,” he cried. “Next thing you know you’ll have a breach of promise suit on your hands.”

“Don’t get fresh!” exclaimed Mr. Sikes in some exasperation. Then, to cover his confusion: “What’s the news from your pa, Oliver? What’s he say in them telegrams?”

“They’re not from father, Uncle Joe,” said the young man, softening. “Jump in behind there. I’ll run you uptown before the storm.”

“I’m not going uptown,” said Mr. Sikes obstinately. “I’m stayin’ here for supper with Serepta. I just remembered it,” he went on, with a guilty, apologetic look at Mrs. Flame. “Oh, before I forget it, Oliver, is there anything serious in them telegrams?”

“Yes, sir! It certainly begins to look serious. I had six at the store this morning, and a dozen telephone calls besides. That’s one reason why I took the afternoon off. Nearly every man on the County Central Committee has telephoned or telegraphed me to-day. The pressure is getting pretty strong, Uncle Joe, and I’m beginning to weaken.”

“Pressure? Weaken? What the devil are you talking about now?” demanded Mr. Sikes, placing one foot on the running-board and grasping the door-handle.

“They want me to make the race for State Senator against Uncle Horace,” said Oliver. “Hop in! I’m going to start.” Then, as the old man scrambled hurriedly into the car, he added: “And I’ve about reached the conclusion to go out and skin Uncle Horace alive.”

“My God!” gasped Mr. Sikes, leaning forward and gripping the back of the front seat with both hands. “You—you don’t mean to tell me you’re going to run for office, Oliver October Baxter!”

“Hang onto your hat, Uncle Joe! I’m going to let her out a little,” sang out Oliver, and “let her out” he did as the car swept out of the driveway into the street.

Mr. Sikes was standing up in the tonneau, grasping the forward seat with one hand, and his hat with the other. He leaned over and shouted in Oliver’s ear.

“You can’t do it! You mustn’t do it! It’s against my wishes, and your pa’s, and—why, how many times have I told you what the gypsy said about —Say! Slow down a little, confound you! Have you told Serepty Grimes about this fool notion of yours?”

“I have. And she’s tickled to death. She says to go ahead and skin him alive. That’s the kind of a hairpin she is!”

Mr. Sikes clung rigidly to the back of the seat for a couple of hundred yards, speechless with a combination of concern and exasperation. Then he sank down into the side chair and bellowed:

“I’m through! I’m done! There’s no use trying to save you—not a damn bit of use. Go ahead and run! I’m through! Stick your neck right into it if you want to. I’ve done my best—I’ve done all a man could do. I no sooner see you safely out of a scrape with a light woman than you start hell-bent for the halls of state. You—”

“Don’t you worry, Uncle Joe,” called out Oliver cheerily. “Uncle Horace will probably snow me under a mile deep.”

Mr. Sikes was silent for a few moments, contemplating this calamity. Suddenly he banged the back of the seat with his clenched fist.

“Not on your life!” he roared. “We’ll skin him alive. You’ll carry every darned precinct in the county. He won’t—”

“Hang onto your hat, Uncle Joe!”

“My what? Good Lord! I forgot—but never mind! Don’t go back after it! It’s an old one anyhow. Yes, sir; we’ll peel the hide off of old Gooch next November—every inch of it. Let me out at the Hubbard House, Oliver. Silas Link drops in there about this time every evening to cool off under the electric fans. Does he know about this?”

“I don’t think he does,” said Oliver, drawing up to the curb in front of the hotel.

“Good!” exclaimed Mr. Sikes, with satisfaction. He clambered out of the car. “Good day, ma’am. I hope you don’t get wet.” He eyed her hair narrowly, even apprehensively. “Hurry along, Oliver. You mustn’t keep her out in the rain.”

“Good-by, Mr. Sikes. Thank you for warning me,” said Mrs. Flame, favoring him with a smile so enchanting that instead of blurting out the latest news to Mr. Link when he encountered him in the lobby of the hotel a few moments later, he gloomily announced that a fellow as young as Oliver didn’t have a ghost of a chance.

CHAPTER XVII

MR. GOOCH DECLARES HIMSELF

The Republicans of the county in convention a week later went through the formality of nominating a ticket, a heretofore useless procedure attended by vainglorious claims, bombastic oratory, unbridled denunciation and a grim sort of jauntiness that passed for confidence and died as soon as the meeting was over. Ever since the Civil War the party had stoutly and steadfastly put up a ticket and just as regularly had abandoned it to its fate. The candidates themselves, accepting defeat at the outset, took little or no interest in the campaign aside from the slight satisfaction they eked out of seeing their names on the printed ballot. It was, so to speak, like reading one's own obituary notice—or, as one hardy, perennial office-seeker remarked—attending one's own funeral and getting back home in time for supper.

But the campaign of 1920 in this hide-bound Democratic stronghold possessed strange, new elements; the under-dog bounced up with surprising animation and showed his teeth, prepared at last to fight for the bone that so long had been denied him. In the first place, the administration at Washington was standing with its back to the wall; it was almost certain to be swept out of power by the resistless force of public opinion. Faint-hearted Republican politicians lost in the depths of Democratic jungles saw light ahead and, rubbing their eyes, started toward it, realizing it was no longer Will-o'-the-wisp or Jack-o'-lantern that led them on. Their eyes glittered, their fingers itched, and they became very strong in the legs. If Harding and Coolidge were to be swept in by the avalanche, why shouldn't they hang on behind and be sucked into office by the same gigantic wave? In the second place, the Democrats of Applegate County, fat and sluggish after years of plenty, had overslept a little in their security. Too late they awoke to the fact that they had four or five weak spots in their county ticket, and while there was small danger of the normal plurality being wiped out at the coming election they were in very grave danger of having it reduced to a humiliating extent.

Mr. Horace Gooch, of Hopkinsville, heretofore a miserly aspirant for legislative honors but persistently denied the distinction for which he was loath to pay, "came across" so handsomely—and so desperately—that the bosses foolishly permitted him to be nominated for the State Senate. The

people did not want him; but that made little or no difference to the party leaders; the people had to take him whether they liked him or not. Mr. Gooch's astonishing contribution to the campaign fund was not to be "passed up" merely because the people didn't approve of him. It is not good politics to allow the people a voice in such matters. Old Gooch would run behind the rest of the ticket, to be sure, but he would "squeeze through" safely, and that was all that was necessary.

The report that young Oliver Baxter, of Rumley, was being urged to make the race against his uncle caused no uneasiness among the bosses. It was not until after the young man was nominated and actually in the field, that misgivings beset the bosses. Young Baxter was popular in the southern section of the county, he was a war hero, and he was an upstanding figure in a community where the voters were as likely as not to "jump the traces." And when the emboldened Republican press of the county began to speak of their candidate as a "shark," there was active and acute dismay. They sent for Mr. Gooch and suggested that it wouldn't be a bad idea for him to withdraw from the race—on account of his age, or his health.

"But I'm not an old man," protested Mr. Gooch irascibly, "and I've never been sick a day in my life. I'm sixty-four. You wouldn't call that old, would you?"

No, the chairman wouldn't call that old, but from what he could gather this was destined to be "a young man's year." Young men were in the saddle; you couldn't shake 'em out.

"Do you mean to tell me," began Horace, genuinely amazed, "that you think this young whipper-snapper of a nephew of mine is liable to defeat me?"

"Oh, I guess perhaps we can pull you through," said the chairman, rather unfeelingly.

"My dear sir, we have a safe majority of four thousand votes in this county. Why do you say you 'guess perhaps' you can pull me through? If you are joking, I wish to state to you right here and now that I do not approve of jokes. If you are in earnest, all I can say is that you must be crazy. The people of this county want a sound, solid, able business man to represent them in the legislature. They don't want a young, inexperienced, untried whipper-snapper—"

"Nobody knows what the people want," said the chairman sententiously. "Now, this young Baxter. He's a fine feller. He's got lots of friends.

Everybody likes him. He has a clear record. There isn't a thing we can say against him. On the other hand, he can say a lot of nasty things about you, Mr. Gooch. We can't come back at him when he begins stumping the county and talking about tax-sales, foreclosures, ten per cent interest, people having to go to the poorhouse, and all that kind of stuff. What kind of a comeback have we? What are we to—"

"No man can accuse me of being dishonest; no man can question my integrity—"

"Lord bless you, Mr. Gooch, nobody's going to accuse you of being dishonest. All they're going to say about you is that you're a rich man, a skinflint, a tax shark, a gouger, a hypocrite, a wolf in sheep's clothing, a snake in the grass, a Shylock, and a good many other things," said the county chairman, with brutal frankness.

Mr. Gooch was not greatly disturbed by the prospect. He had heard all these terms of opprobrium before; he was used to them. He said something about "water off of a duck's back," and fell to twisting his wiry gray beard with steady, claw-like fingers.

"We can't afford to lose a single seat in the legislature," went on the chairman. "That's why we thought best to put it up to you straight, Mr. Gooch. I'm not saying you'll be licked next November, but you stand a blamed good chance of it, let me tell you, if this young Baxter goes after you without gloves."

"I've just been thinking," said Mr. Gooch, leaning forward in his chair, "suppose I go down to Rumley and have a talk with Oliver."

"What about?" demanded the other, sharply.

"I may be able to reason with him. I understand he has not definitely decided to make the race. I have an idea I can persuade him to decline."

"No chance," said the other, shaking his head. "He's got it in for you, I hear."

Mr. Gooch got up and began pacing the floor. His lean, mean face was set in even harder lines than usual; his mouth was drawn down at the corners, the lower lip protruding like a thin liver-colored cushion into which his shaved upper lip seemed to sink rigidly.

"See here, Smith," he began, halting in front of the "boss," "I may as well come out flat-footed and tell you I've never been satisfied with all these

stories and speculations concerning the disappearance of my brother-in-law a year ago."

"You mean this young feller's father?"

"Yes. I married his sister. I don't know as you've heard that young Oliver Baxter and his father were not on very good terms. They quarreled a great deal. This nephew of mine has got murderous instincts. He threw rocks at me once. He's got an ungovernable temper. He—"

"I've heard all that bunk about a gypsy or somebody like that prophesying he'd be hung. It's bunk."

"I agree with you. I took no stock in that gypsy's prophecy at the time, and I never have. But, as I say, I'm not satisfied with things. It's mighty queer that a man like Oliver Baxter could disappear off of the face of the earth and never be heard of again. Most people believe he's alive—hiding somewhere—but I don't believe it for a minute. He's dead. He died that night a year ago when he had his last row with his son. And, what's more to the point, I am here to say I don't believe his son has told all he knows about the—er—the matter."

He waited to see what effect this statement would have on the chairman. Mr. Smith's eyes narrowed.

"Say, what are you trying to get at, Mr. Gooch? Are you thinking of charging that boy with—with having had a hand in—"

"I'm not charging anything," snapped Mr. Gooch. "I'm only saying what I believe, and that is that Oliver is holding something back. If my poor brother-in-law is dead, I want to know it. I'm not saying there was foul play, mind you. But I do say it's possible he might have made way with himself that night, and that Oliver may know when and how he did it."

"Well," said Smith slowly, "that comes pretty near to being a charge, doesn't it, Mr. Gooch?"

"You can call it what you please. All I've got to say is that I'm not satisfied, and I'm going to the bottom of this business if it's possible to do so." He sat down again.

"So that's what you're going to see young Baxter about, is it? You're going to threaten him with an investigation if he doesn't withdraw from the race, eh? Well, what are you going to do if he up and tells you to go to hell?"

Mr. Gooch winced.

“It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve been told to go to hell,” he said, with a wintry smile. “However, it is not my intention to threaten my nephew, Mr. Smith. Nothing is farther from my thoughts. I’m simply going to let him understand that I am not satisfied with things as they are. I don’t mind telling you that I’ve already made a few inquiries and—well, there is something peculiar about the whole business, that’s all I’ve got to say. It won’t hurt my nephew to know that I’m interested, will it?” he wound up, a sly, crafty twinkle in his eye.

“You take a tip from me, Mr. Gooch,” said the chairman, somewhat forcibly. “Let sleeping dogs lie. If you go to making any cracks about this young feller that you can’t prove, he’ll wipe the earth up with you next November. I’ve been in politics a long time and I know something about the human race. You are banking on the big Democratic majority we usually have in this county. I want to tell you right here and now that if you start any ugly talk about young Baxter and can’t back it up with facts, there won’t be a decent Democrat in the county that’ll vote for you. And I guess we’re far enough south to be able to say that most of us are decent.”

Mr. Gooch arose. “You said a while ago that he would stump this county from end to end, calling me everything he can lay his tongue to. Well, all I’ve got to say to you, Mr. Smith, is that he sha’n’t have it all his own way.”

“There’s just this difference, Mr. Gooch. The voters will believe what he says about you, and they won’t believe a blamed word you say about him.”

“Good day, Mr. Smith!”

“Good day, Mr. Gooch.”

Two days later, Horace Gooch stopped his ancient automobile in front of the Baxter Block in Rumley and inquired of a man in the doorway:

“Is young Oliver Baxter here?”

The loiterer turned his head lazily without changing the position of his body, squinted searchingly into the store, and then replied that he was.

“Will you ask him to step out here? I want a word or two with him.”

Another searching look into the store. “He seems to be busy, Mister. Leastwise, he’s talkin’ to a couple of men.”

“Tell him his uncle is out here.”

The citizen of Rumley started.

“The one he’s runnin’ against?” he demanded.

"Yes. His Uncle Horace."

"Well, I guess I can do that much for you, Mr. Gooch," drawled the other generously, and shuffled slowly into the store. Presently he returned.

"He says to hitch your Ford to that telephone pole and come right in. He'll be disengaged in a couple of minutes."

Mr. Gooch glared. "You tell him I swore never to enter that store again. If he wants to see me he will have to come out here."

The citizen disappeared. He was back in a jiffy, grinning broadly.

"Well?" demanded Mr. Gooch, as the messenger remained silent. "What did he say?"

The citizen chuckled. "It ain't fit to print," said he.

"Well," said Mr. Gooch, after a moment's reflection, "I don't mind waiting a while. He'll have to come out some time, I reckon."

The citizen shrugged his shoulders and spread his palms in a gesture disclaiming all responsibility.

Mr. Gooch shut off his engine and settled back in the seat, the personification of grim and dogged patience.

Fifteen minutes passed. Passers-by, sensing something unusual, found an excuse for loitering in front of nearby showwindows; several persons entered Silas Link's undertaking parlors next door and seemed deeply interested in the rubber plants that adorned the windows; Marmaduke Smith, the messenger-boy, with two telegrams in his book, pedaled his bicycle up to the curb and, anchoring it with one thin and spidery leg, sagged limply upon the handlebar and waited for something to happen. Mr. Link came out of his office, and after taking one look at the hard-faced old man in the automobile, hurried to the rear of his establishment. A few seconds later he returned, accompanied by Joseph Sikes. They took up a position in the doorway and, ignoring Mr. Gooch, gazed disinterestedly down the street in the opposite direction.

At last Oliver October appeared. He glanced at his watch as he crossed the sidewalk.

"Hello, Uncle Horace," was his greeting. "Sorry to have kept you waiting. And I'm in a bit of a hurry, too. Some friends coming down on Number Seventeen. Mr. and Mrs. Sage—you remember them, no doubt.

And their daughter. The train's due at 4:10—and it's three minutes of four now. Anything in particular you wanted to see me about?"

"Yes, there is," said Mr. Gooch harshly. "I came over here to demand an apology from you, young man—a public apology, printed over your signature in the newspapers."

"What's the joke, Uncle Horace?" asked Oliver calmly.

"Joke? There's no joke about it. You know what I mean. I demand an apology for what you said in the letter you wrote in reply to mine of the twenty-seventh inst."

"Do you expect me to print my letter in the newspapers together with the apology?"

"That isn't necessary, young man."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Oliver, unruffled. "I'll agree to publish your letter to me and my reply, and I'll follow them up with an apology for mine if you'll apologize to me for yours. That's fair, isn't it?"

"Don't beat about the bush," snapped Mr. Gooch. "Don't get fresh, young man. I'm not here to bandy words with you. I wrote you a very plain and dignified letter in which I told you what I thought of the underhanded way you acted in regard to those dear old ladies, Mrs. Bannester and her sister. You know as well as I do that it was my intention to restore their property to them, absolutely tax free and without a single claim against it. You simply sneaked in and got ahead of me, and now you are giving people to understand that I meant to foreclose on 'em and turn them out of house and home. You—"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Oliver, looking at his watch again, "I know that's what you said in your letter—that and a lot of other things, Uncle Horace."

"And what did you say in reply to my simple, straightforward letter? You said you wouldn't trust me as far as you could throw a locomotive with one hand, or something like that. You said—"

"Yes, I know I said that—and a lot of other things too. You don't have to repeat what I said. I've got a copy of the letter in my desk. It wasn't a very long letter, for that matter, and I can recall every word of it. Do you want to continue this discussion, Uncle Horace? If you'll look around you will see that quite a little crowd is collecting. Don't you think you'd better drop the matter right here and now?"

"No, I don't. I don't care how big a crowd there is. The bigger the better, far as I'm concerned. If I don't have a written and published acknowledgment from you that you deliberately misrepresented me, that you played me an underhanded trick simply for political purposes, I'll—I'll—"

"Well, what?"

"I'll make it so blamed hot for you you'll wish you'd never been born," grated Mr. Gooch, shaking his bony finger in his nephew's face.

Observing this physical symptom of animosity, the Messrs. Sikes and Link hastily stepped forth from the doorway and advanced toward the car.

"Keep your temper, Oliver," called out the former warningly. "Hang on to it!"

"Don't forget yourself, boy," cried Mr. Link.

Mr. Gooch glanced at the two old men.

"You stay away from here, you meddling old—" he started to shout.

"Blow your police whistle, Silas," urged Mr. Sikes. "Blow it! We'll see if—"

"Never mind, Uncle Joe," interrupted Oliver, with an airy wave of his hand. "No need of a cop, is there, Uncle Horace?"

"Not at present," replied his uncle grimly. "Later on we may need one—but not just now."

"Then we can end the discussion in two seconds. I decline to apologize, I refuse to accept an apology from you, and I'll see you in Jericho before I'll retract a word I've said about the Bannester affair. The only thing I will say to you is that I hadn't the faintest idea of running for office when I helped those poor old ladies out of their trouble. You can lump it if you—"

"And what's more," broke in Mr. Sikes, heatedly, "this nomination was forced on Oliver against the wishes of his friends and family. When his poor old father sees in the newspapers that Oliver is headed for the halls of state, he'll break his heart. No matter where Ollie is, he grabs up the newspaper every morning of his life to see what the news is from Rumley—"

"Is *that* so?" snarled Mr. Gooch. "Well, I'm not so sure of that, Mr. Swipes—I'm not so sure of it, and neither are a great many other people. There are people in this county—yes, right here in this town—that would like to know a lot more about what has become of my poor brother-in-law than they know at present."

“I am one of those people, Uncle Horace,” said Oliver quietly.

“And don’t you go calling Ollie Baxter a brother-in-law,” snorted Mr. Sikes. “I won’t stand here and let you slander my lifelong friend by calling him a brother-in-law. If you’ll get out of that automobile, I’ll—”

“Hold your horses, Joe,” put in Mr. Link, clutching his crony’s arm.

“Oh, he can’t bulldoze me,” said Mr. Gooch loftily.

“Smash him, Mr. Sikes,” whispered young Marmaduke Smith, excitedly.

Horace turned to his nephew. “It rests with you, young man, whether a certain investigation takes place or not,” he said, threateningly.

“What do you mean by investigation?” demanded Oliver, his eyes narrowing. “Just what are you driving at?”

His uncle leaned forward and spoke slowly, distinctly. “Is there any evidence that your father ever left this place at all?”

Oliver looked his uncle straight in the eye for many seconds, a curious pallor stealing over his face. When he spoke it was with a visible effort; and his voice was low and tense.

“There is no evidence to the contrary.”

“There’s no evidence at all,” said Gooch, “either one way or the other. There has never been anything like a thorough search for him—in the neighborhood of his own home. From all I can learn, you have run things to suit yourself so far as the search around here is concerned. Well, I am here to say that I’m not satisfied. I don’t believe Oliver Baxter ever ran away from home. I believe he’s out there in that swamp of yours. Now you know what I mean by an investigation, young man—and if it is ever undertaken I want to say to you it won’t be under your direction and it won’t be a half-hearted job. And the swamp won’t be the only place to be searched. There are other places he might be besides that swamp.”

“I think I get your meaning, Uncle Horace,” said Oliver, now cool and self-possessed. “If I don’t do what you ask, you’ll start something, eh? Your idea, I take it, is to impress the voters of the county with the idea that my father may have met with foul play, and that I know more about the circumstances than I’ve—”

“I am not saying or claiming anything of the sort,” broke in Mr. Gooch hastily, with visions of a suit for slander looming up before him. “I am not

accusing you of anything, Oliver. All I want and all I shall insist on is a thorough examination."

"And if I agree to withdraw from the race and perjure myself in the matter of the Bannester tax scandal, you will drop the investigation and forget all about it—is that the idea?"

"I hate to take any drastic step that might involve my own nephew in—er—in fact, I'd a good deal sooner not ask the authorities to take a hand in the matter."

"I see. The point I'm trying to get at is this, Uncle Horace," went on Oliver, relentlessly. "If I do what you ask, you will agree to let me off scot-free even though I may have killed my own father? You can answer that question, can't you?"

"I am not here to argue with you," snapped Mr. Gooch, his gaze sweeping the ever-increasing group of spectators. "Your candidacy has nothing to do with my determination to sift this business to the bottom," he went on, suddenly realizing that he was now committed to definite action. "I shall appeal to the proper authorities and nothing you do or say, young man, can head off the investigation. That's final. I'm going to find out what became of the money he drew out of the bank and where you got the money to pay up for Mrs. Bannester and her sister. I'm going to find out why you refuse to let the dredgers go farther out into the swamp, and I'm going to—Oh, you needn't grin! There are plenty of witnesses who will swear that you and him were not on good terms, and that one day you threatened to hire an aeroplane and take him up five miles and drop him overboard if he didn't quit pestering you with that story about the gypsy. A lot of people heard you say that and—"

"It begins to look as though you were actually accusing me of murder, Uncle Horace."

"Good boy!" cried Mr. Sikes, appeasingly. "That's the way to hold your temper. He's wonderful, ain't he, Silas?"

"Wonderful, nothing!" said Mr. Link. "He ain't had anything to get mad about, far as I can see. The thing is, why ain't he laughin' himself sick at the darned old nanny goat?"

"You go to grass!" shouted Mr. Gooch furiously.

Mr. Sikes and Mr. Link joined in the gale of laughter that went up from the crowd.

Mr. Gooch, crimson with rage, shook his finger at Oliver. “That’s right —that’s right! Laugh while you can, you young scoundrel. You think you’re safe and that you got everything covered up, but you’ll be laughing on the other side of the face before I get through with you. I’m going to find out what happened to Oliver Baxter if it takes all the rest of my life. You won’t be laughing so darned idiotically when the prosecuting attorney begins asking questions of you. You bet you won’t. Because he’ll be getting at the truth and the real facts, and that’s what you don’t want, my laddie buck. I’m going to demand a complete investigation before I’m a day older, and I’m going to show the people of this here town that I mean business. The grand jury’s in session now. I’ll have this business up before them to-morrow and I’ll demand a complete investi—”

He broke off in the middle of the oft-repeated word and jerked his head back. Oliver had taken that instant to snap his fingers under Mr. Gooch’s nose, not once but thrice in rapid succession.

“Investigate and be damned!” cried the young man angrily. “You infernal old buzzard! Go ahead and—”

“Whoa, Oliver!” shouted Mr. Sikes, in a panic. “Don’t lose your—”

“All right, Uncle Joe,” gulped Oliver—“all right! I came near letting go of myself for a—”

“He would have killed me in cold blood if I’d been alone with him,” exclaimed Mr. Gooch. “My God, when I think of poor old Oliver out there on that lonely back road, trying to reason with him, I—”

“See here, Uncle Horace,” interrupted Oliver, in a calm, matter-of-fact tone, “I’ll tell you what I will do. I will give you five thousand dollars in cash if you find my father for me. It has cost me twice that amount already —my own money, mind you—but I’ll give you—”

“Dead or alive?” demanded Mr. Gooch sternly, accusingly.

“Yes, dead or alive. Now, wait a second. I’ve got something more to say to you. My father always said you were the meanest creature that God ever let live, and I used to dispute it once in a while. I claimed that a hyena was worse. Now I know he was right and I was wrong. Go ahead with your investigation. Go as far as you like. You can’t bluff me. I am in this race to stay and I’m going after you tooth and nail. Now I guess we understand each other. I’m going after you because of the way you treated my father and I’m —”

“And I’m going after you for the way *you* treated him,” bawled Mr. Gooch, throwing in the clutch viciously. Then he muttered an execration.

“If you’ll give Marmaduke Smith a dime he’ll crank it for you,” said Oliver, turning on his heel. He glanced up at the clock on the bank down the street. “Oh, thunder!” he exclaimed in dismay. “You’ve made me miss the train!”

“If you crank that car, Marmaduke,” said Mr. Sikes menacingly, “I’ll boot you all over town.”

So Mr. Gooch got out and cranked the car, and drove away to a chorus of undesirable invitations.

“Where’s Oliver?” demanded Mr. Sikes, as the car turned the corner. “We got to stick purty close to him from now on, Silas.”

“What for, Joe?”

“So’s we can be ready to establish an alibi in case anything happens to Horace Gooch. Supposin’ some poor devil he’s made a beggar of takes it into his head to put a bullet into—What say, Marmy?”

“Oliver took my wheel and beat it for the depot,” said Marmaduke Smith happily.

CHAPTER XVIII

JOSEPHINE AND HENRY THE EIGHTH

The return of Mrs. Sage after an absence of twenty-three years was an "event" far surpassing in interest anything that had transpired in Rumley since the strange disappearance of old Oliver Baxter.

Hundreds of people, eager to see the famous Josephine Judge, crowded the station platform, long before the train from Chicago was due to arrive; they filled the depot windows; they were packed like sardines atop the spare baggage and express trucks; they ranged in overflow disorder along the sidewalks on both sides of the street adjacent. In this curious throng were acquaintances of another day, those who remembered her as the incomprehensible wife of Parson Sage when Sharp's Field was a barren outskirt and the trains for Chicago passed through Rumley at forty miles an hour—a whistle, a rising and diminishing roar, a disdainful clanging of bells, and then the tail end of a coach that left a whirlwind of dust in its wake as it thundered away. The *Morning Despatch* dug up an ancient and totally featureless picture of Josephine Judge as she was at the time of her last appearance in Chicago, some twenty years before, and printed it, with rare tact on the part of the editor, in that department of the paper devoted exclusively on Saturdays—and this was Saturday—to church news and a directory of divine services. Inasmuch as this sadly blurred two-column "cut" represented Miss Judge as a svelte Salvation Army lassie, the editor may have been pardoned for giving it a prominent position on the "Church page," notwithstanding the fact that said lassie was depicted in the act of tickling a tambourine with the toe of her left foot. In any case, a great many people who were not in the habit of reading the church section studied it with interest this morning, and planned to take half an hour or so off in the afternoon.

The train pulled in. The crowd tiptoed and gaped, craned its thousand necks, and then surged to the right. Above the hissing of steam and the grinding of wheels rose the voice of Sammy Parr far down the platform.

"Keep back, everybody! Don't crowd up so close. Right this way, Mr. Sage—How are you? Open up there, will you? Let 'em through. Got my new car over here, Mr. Sage—lots of room. Hello, Jane! Great honor to have the pleasure of taking Mrs. Sage home in my car. Right over this way. Grab those suitcases, boys. Open up, please!"

Mr. Sage paused aghast half way down the steps of the last coach but one. He stared, open-mouthed, out over the sea of faces; his knees seemed about to give way under him; his nerveless fingers came near relaxing their grip on the suitcase handles; he was bewildered, stunned.

"In heaven's name—" he groaned, and then, poor man, over his shoulder in helpless distress to the girl behind him—"Oh, Jane, why didn't we wait for the midnight—"

But some one had seized the bags and with them he was dragged ingloriously to the platform. Jane came next, crimson with embarrassment. She hurried down the steps and waited at the bottom for her mother to appear. As might have been expected of one so truly theatric, Josephine delayed her appearance until the stage was clear, so to speak. She even went so far as to keep her audience waiting. Preceded by the Pullman porter, who up to this time had remained invisible but now appeared as a proud and shining minion bearing boxes and traveling cases, wraps and furs, she at length appeared, stopping on the last step to survey, with well-affected surprise and a charming assumption of consternation, the crowd that packed the platform. Recovering herself with admirable aplomb, she rested her hand gracefully upon the brass rail and bowed to the right and the left and straight before her; the rigid smile with which every successful actress nightly envelops her audience in response to curtain calls parted her carmine lips while her big eyes ranged with sightless intensity over a void studded with what their fatuous owners were prone to call faces. Just as she was on the point of stepping down to the platform, her attention seemed suddenly to have been caught and held by an object off to the left at an elevation of perhaps ten feet above the heads of the spectators. She studied this object smilingly for thirty or forty seconds. As many as a dozen kodaks clicked during this brief though providential period of inactivity on her part.

Now, a great many—perhaps all—of those who made up the eager, curious crowd, expected to behold a young and radiant Josephine Judge; they had seen her in the illustrated Sunday supplements and in the pictorial magazines; always she was sprightly and vivid and alluring. They were confronted, instead, by a tall, angular woman of fifty-two or-three, carelessly—even "sloppily"—dressed in a slouchy two-piece pepper and salt tweed walking costume, a glistening black straw hat that sat well down upon a mass of bright auburn hair—(old-timers in the crowd remembered her jet black tresses)—stout English oxfords somewhat run down at the heel, and a neck piece of white fur. What most of the observers at first took to be a wad

of light brown fur tucked under her right arm was discovered later to be a beady-eyed "Pekinese."

But the minister's wife was still a vividly handsome woman; the years had put their lines at the corners of her eyes, to be sure, and had pressed the fullness out of her cheeks, but they had not dimmed the luster of her eyes nor sobered the smile that played about her mirthful lips. She had taken good care of herself; she had made a business of keeping young in looks as well as in spirit.

She had gone away from Rumley with a cheap and unlovely suitcase; she came back with twenty trunks, her traveling bags of seal, her jewel box and toilet case, hat boxes, shoe boxes, a pedigreed "Peke" named Henry the Eighth, and an accent that could have come from nowhere save the heart of London-town. In a clear, full voice, trained to reach remote perches in lofty theaters, she spoke to her husband from the coach steps:

"Herbert, dear, have you the checks for my luggage, or have I?"

"I—I will attend to the trunks—" he began huskily, only to be interrupted by the indefatigable Sammy.

"Don't give 'em another thought, Mr. Sage. I'll see to everything. Give me the checks and—right this way, please, Mrs. Sage."

"Thank you—thank you so much," said Mrs. Sage graciously, and, as Sammy bustled on ahead, inquired in an undertone of Jane at whose side she walked: "Is that the wonderful Oliver October I've been hearing so much about?"

"No, Mother—that is Sammy Parr. I—I don't see Oliver anywhere. I wrote him the train we were coming—"

A few paces ahead Sammy was explaining loudly to Mr. Sage: "I guess something important of a political nature must have turned up to keep Oliver from meeting the train. We had it all fixed up to meet you with my car and he was to be here at four sharp. Doc Lansing's up at Harbor Point, Michigan, for a little vacation. Won't be back till Sunday week. Muriel's out here in the car, Mr. Sage. She'll drive you home while I see about the baggage."

Mr. Sage had recovered his composure by this time. He leaned close to Sammy's ear and said gravely:

"Luggage, Sammy—luggage."

"Sure—I get you," said Sammy, winking. "But just the same I'll call it baggage till I've got it safely out of the hands of Jim O'Brien, the baggage master. He doesn't like me any too well as it is, and if I called it—Here we are! Hop right in, Jane. Permit me to introduce myself, Mrs. Sage. I am—"

"I remember you quite well," interrupted the great actress (pronouncing it "quate"). "You are Sammy Parr—little Sammy Parr who used to live—ah—let me see, where was it you were living when I left Rumley, Sammy?"

Sammy flushed with joy to the roots of his hair.

"I didn't think you'd remember me, Mrs.—"

"Pairfectly," said she. "Oh, thank you so much. What a lovely car you have. Don't come too close to Henry the Eighth—he has a vile way of snapping at people, whether he likes them or not. My word, Sammy! Jane! Herbert! Can I believe my eyes? Is this Rumley? Is this—"

"This is my wife, Mrs. Sage," introduced Sammy, indicating the bare-headed young lady at the wheel.

"How do you do, Mrs. Sage. I'm awfully thrilled to meet you. I saw you act in London during the war. My first husband was an officer in the American Army, you see. You were perfectly lovely. I shall never forget—oh, dear, what was the name of the play? I ought to remember—"

"Don't try," interrupted Mrs. Sage. "I want to forget it myself. I say, Herbert, old thing, you can't make me believe this is Rumley. You are deceiving me. I don't recognize a single—Oh, yes, I do! I take it all back. I would know that man if I saw him in Timbuktu. The old Johnnie in the car we just passed. It was Gooch—the amiable Gooch—and, my word, what a dust he was raising!"

Oliver, pedaling furiously, arrived at the parsonage ten minutes behind the Sages. The minister greeted him as he came clattering up the front steps.

"Sh!" he cautioned, his finger to his lips. "Don't make such a noise, Oliver—if you please. She's—she's resting. Sh! Do you mind tiptoeing, lad? Jane and I have got quite in the habit of it the past two weeks. I am happy to see you, my boy. She always rests about this time of the day. You have come out for the senatorship, I hear. Especially if she's had a train trip or anything like that. Well, well, I hope you will go in with flying colors. If she doesn't get her rest right on the minute, she has a headache and—"

"Where is Jane, Uncle Herbert?" broke in Oliver, twiddling his hat. He was struck by the dazed, beatific, and yet harassed expression in the

minister's eyes—as if he were still in a maze of wonder and perplexity from which he was vainly trying to extricate himself.

"Jane? Oh, yes, Jane. Why, Jane is upstairs with her dear mother—helping her with her hair, I think. I am sure she will not be down for some time, Oliver. After the hair I think she rubs her back or something of that sort. Do you mind toddling—I mean strolling—around the yard with me, Oliver? I was on the point of taking Henry the Eighth out for a little exercise—ten minutes is the allotted time, ten to the second. He—"

"Henry the what?" inquired Oliver, still gripping the pastor's hand.

"The Eighth," said Mr. Sage, looking about the porch and shifting the position of his feet in some trepidation. "Bless my soul, what can have become of him? I hope I haven't been standing on him. I should have squashed him—Ah, I remember! The hatrack!"

He dashed into the hall, followed by Oliver, and there was Henry the Eighth suspended from the hatrack by his leash in such a precarious fashion that only by standing on his hind legs was he able to avoid strangulation.

"I am so absent-minded," murmured Mr. Sage, rather plaintively. "Poor doggie! Was he being hanged like a horrid old murderer? Was he—"

"Hey!" cried Oliver. "He's nipping your ankle, Uncle Herbert."

"I know he is," said Mr. Sage, smiling patiently. "He does it every time he gets a chance. I'm quite used to it by now."

"I'd kick his ugly little head off," said Oliver.

"Oh, dear, no! You wouldn't kick Henry the Eighth, I'm sure you wouldn't."

They were out on the porch now, Mr. Sage holding the leash at arm's length and walking in a lopsided, overhanging sort of manner in order to keep his ankles out of reach of Henry the Eighth's sharp little snappers. Oliver followed down the steps and out upon the sunburnt lawn.

"Does he snap at you like that all the time?" he inquired, sending a swift, searching glance up at the second floor windows.

"I am afraid he does," said Mr. Sage, dejectedly. "He doesn't like me."

"I'll tell you what, Uncle Herbert," began Oliver mendaciously; "you just lead him around toward the back of the house, out of sight of those windows up there, and I'll show you how to break him of that. I love dogs, and I know how to make 'em love me."

“He will not allow you to pet him, Oliver,” said Mr. Sage hastily.

“I’m not going to pet him,” said Oliver grimly. “You want to break him of biting, don’t you?”

“I should very much like to be on—er—friendly terms with him.”

“All right then. Bring him back this way. We’ll give him his first lesson in politeness. The trouble with Henry the Eighth is he’s been spoiled by women. What he needs is a good sound spanking.”

“Bless my soul, Oliver! You—”

“I guess it’s safe over there back of the woodshed, Uncle Herbert. They can’t see or hear from the house. Many’s the time I’ve been taken out to the woodshed, and I don’t believe Henry the Eighth is any better than I was.”

“My dear boy, I—”

“Now, let him snap at you a couple of times—let him think he’s got you trembling all over with fright. That’s the stuff! Gee, he’s a mean little beast, isn’t he? He’s got the idea he’s a lion or a tiger. Now, yank him up by the leash and take hold of the back of his neck with your left hand—”

“You do it, Oliver. Really, I—I—can’t,” pleaded Mr. Sage.

“Go ahead! Yank him up—look out, sir! He came close to getting you that time. That’s the way. You taught me the art of self-defense a long time ago. Turn about is fair play, sir. I’m going to teach you the art of self-protection. Now take the end of the leash and give him ten sharp cuts with it. Go on! I’ll keep watch.”

And so, to the immeasurable astonishment of Henry the Eighth, ten chastening lashes were administered to his squirming hindquarters, each succeeding one being a little harder than its predecessor as the minister abandoned himself to a most unseemly though delightful state of malevolence. Half way through he decided to drag the performance out a little by increasing the length of the intervals between lashes, thus deceiving Henry the Eighth into the belief that each blow was the last only to find himself lamentably mistaken a few seconds later.

“Keep a sharp watch, Oliver,” whispered Mr. Sage, between his teeth somewhere along about the seventh lash.

“I will,” said Oliver, who hadn’t taken his eyes off of the west window in what he knew to be Jane’s bed-chamber. “Don’t you worry.”

“For goodness’ sake, don’t—don’t let her catch me at it.”

"I'm awfully sorry I wasn't at the station when Jane—when you got in, Uncle Herbert. Did you have a comfortable trip down from—"

"Nine," counted Mr. Sage, and then fifteen seconds later: "Ten. Now, what shall I do with him, Oliver? If I let him down he'll jump at me like a rattlesnake and—"

"Oh, no, he won't," said Oliver, reluctantly withdrawing his gaze from the window and joining the other beyond the corner of the woodshed. "He'll lick your hand if you hold it close enough to his nose. Let him down. See that? He's got his tail between his legs—or as much of it as he can get there—and he'll keep it there till he thinks you want him to wag it."

"I feel like a brute," muttered Mr. Sage, but not as contritely as might have been expected. "I hope I haven't really injured the poor little fellow." Henry the Eighth, cringing flat on his little belly, peeped anxiously but evilly up at his new master. "He doesn't appear to be able to stand on his feet, Oliver."

"Does he know any tricks?"

"Oh my, yes. He's really quite clever. He does quite a few for Josephine. Rolls over, plays dead, jumps over her foot, sits up and begs, and—"

"Tell him to roll over," said Oliver sternly.

"Oh, he won't do them for me. He growls at me whenever I attempt to __"

"Tell him to roll over."

"Roll over, Henry—roll over, sir! Why—why, bless my soul, he's doing it."

"Tell him to play dead."

Henry the Eighth "played dead"—with his beady eyes wide open, however—and then sat up on his haunches and begged.

"Now, see what he'll do if you try to pat his head."

"Oh, I wouldn't like to risk—er—he is quite likely to nip my fingers if I __"

"If he tries it, spank him once or twice."

Henry the Eighth plucked up the courage to growl when the minister's left hand neared his head. An instant later, the flat of Mr. Sage's right hand came in contact with a portion of Henry's anatomy that already had suffered

considerable pain and indignity. Whereupon he squeezed out an apologetic little yelp and turned over on his back to play dead again. Mr. Sage solemnly shook both of the feathery front paws and called him a nice doggie. He had to call him a nice doggie three times, and, besides that, had to show his teeth in a broad, ingratiating smile before Henry was willing to trust his own eyes and ears. He wagged his bushy tail weakly, experimentally.

"Nice doggie," said Mr. Sage again.

"Don't overdo it," warned Oliver. "Don't be too polite to him. He'll be thinking he's a lion again, Uncle Herbert."

"I wouldn't have Mrs. Sage know that I've thrashed him for anything in the world," said the minister guiltily. "You won't mention it, my lad?"

"I can't promise not to tell Jane about it."

"Oh, I don't mind your telling Jane. She's been at me for a week to paddle him—"

"I say, Uncle Herbert, don't you think Jane may have finished—er—rubbing Mrs. Sage's back by this time?" inquired the impatient Oliver.

"Possibly," said the other. "Come along, doggie—let's romp a bit. Oh, by the way, before I forget it, Oliver, Mrs. Sage prefers to be—er—called Miss Judge."

Oliver's face fell. "Oh, thunder! Am I not to call her Aunt Josephine?"

"Certainly—certainly, my boy. I mean, Miss Judge in public. It seems to be a—er—a theatrical custom. On the train coming down a gentleman from Hopkinsville joined us for a few moments and I was obliged to introduce her as 'my wife, Miss Judge.' Come along, Henry—there's a nice dog! Jump over my foot! Good! He did it splendidly, didn't he, Oliver?"

Meanwhile, Jane, having brushed her mother's hair, was now employed in the more laborious task of rubbing the lady's back—a task attended by grateful little grunts and sighs on the part of the patient and a rather expressive tightening of the lips and crinkling of the brow on the part of the impatient daughter.

"You have a great deal of magnetism in your hands, my dear," droned Mrs. Sage, luxuriously—the sort of thing one invariably purrs when one's head is being rubbed. "As I say, my maid always did it for me in London, but God bless my soul, she never had the touch that you have. Really, my dear, it was like being scraped with sandpaper. The right shoulder now, please."

“I think Oliver is downstairs with father,” began Jane wistfully.

“She was my dresser, too,” went on Mrs. Sage drowsily. “Really, I wonder now that I endured her as long as I did. And I shouldn’t, you may be sure, if she hadn’t—a little lower down, dear—if she hadn’t—ah—what was I going to say? Oh, yes; if she hadn’t been so kind to Henry the Eighth. I do hope your father is giving him a nice little romp in the front—”

“Shall I run down and see, Mother?” broke in Jane eagerly.

“Presently, my dear, presently. I shall be taking my tub in a few—you say we have a bathroom now? Dear me, how the house has grown. It used to be a sort of stand-up process in a wash-tub half full of warm water and suds. Ah me! What a change time has wrought. You must take me all over the house to-morrow, Jane dear. I sha’n’t be quite up to it this evening, don’t you know. How many servants have we?”

“One,” said Jane succinctly.

“One?” gasped Josephine. “I never heard of such a thing.”

“One is all we need, and besides one is all we can afford. I am afraid you will have a lot to put up with, Mother dear.”

Josephine was silent for a long time. Suddenly she lifted her head and looked up into her daughter’s face.

“My dear,” she said, with a wry little twist at the corner of her generous mouth, “I’ve come home to stay. I daresay you will find me capable of taking things as they are. I did it once before and I can do it again. Now, if you will draw me a nice warm tub; I’ll—I’ll—” she yawned voluptuously —“I’ll get in and sozzle a bit. And that reminds me, Jane. I shall never in any way interfere with you as housekeeper here. Your father assures me that you are a perfect manager. I was a very poor one in my day. I daresay we’d better let well enough alone. Don’t make it too hot, my dear—and do see if you can find my bath slippers in that bag over there by the door.”

The express wagon with Mrs. Sage’s trunks arrived as Oliver, in despair, was preparing to depart as he had come, on Marmaduke Smith’s bicycle. He took fresh hope. Here was a chance to see Jane after all. With joyous avidity he offered to help Joe O’Brien lug the trunks upstairs.

“Where do you want ’em, Jane?” he shouted from the bottom of the stairs. There was no answer. “Where shall we put them, Uncle Herbert?” he asked, his hands jammed deep in his pockets.

“Bless my soul, I—I haven’t an idea,” groaned Mr. Sage, passing his hand over his brow. This act seemed to have cleared some of the fog from his brain. “Unless you put them in my study,” he suggested brightly. “They will fill it to overflowing, but—but I can think of no other place. Dear me, what a lot of them there are.”

Fifteen minutes later, the trunks being piled high in the pastor’s little study, Oliver mopped his brow and expressed himself feelingly to Mr. Sage from the bottom of the porch steps.

“I’ll make Uncle Horace sweat for this,” he growled. “If he hadn’t come nosing around this afternoon, I would have—At the same time, Uncle Herbert, I think Jane might have been allowed a minute or two to say hello to a fellow. Good Lord, sir, is—is this to be Jane’s job from now on?”

“Sh! The windows are open, Oliver.”

“Is she to be nothing but a lady’s maid to Aunt Josephine?”

“We are so happy to have her with us, my dear boy, that—er—nothing—er—”

“I understand, Uncle Herbert,” broke in Oliver contritely, noting the pastor’s distress. “I’m sorry I spoke as I did. Tell Jane I’ll call her up this evening. And please tell Aunt Josephine I am awfully keen to see her. I used to love her better than anything going, you know.”

“It’s different now,” said Mr. Sage. “You are both considerably older than you were. Will you come up to-night?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll come up and move the trunks for you, Uncle Herbert. So that you can have room to write next Sunday’s sermon,” he said, with his gay, whimsical smile.

Then he pedaled slowly away on Marmaduke’s wheel, looking over his shoulder until the windows of the parsonage were no longer visible.

CHAPTER XIX

OLIVER COMPLAINS

Three days later, the Sheriff of the County served papers on Oliver October. The prosecuting attorney had refused to lay the matter before the grand jury, as requested by Horace Gooch, but had grudgingly acceded to his demand that an official investigation be instituted and carried to a definite conclusion by the authorities.

"I want you to understand, Oliver," explained the Sheriff, "that this is none of my doing. Gooch has obtained an order from the court, calling for a search of the swamp and your premises, basing his affidavit on the suspicion that his brother-in-law came to his death by foul means and—er—so on. He doesn't charge anybody with the crime, as you will see by reading a copy of the order. I guess it won't amount to much. You will have to submit to an examination, answer a lot of questions, and refrain from any interference whatsoever with the search that is to be conducted. In plain English, the order means that you are to have no voice in the matter and that you are to take no part in the search. It's in the hands of the law now. I am authorized to begin the investigation at once and not to stop until old Gooch is thoroughly satisfied that a crime has not been committed. As I was saying a few minutes ago, he agrees to pay all the costs arising from this investigation in case nothing comes of it. On the other hand, if your father's body is found and there is any evidence of foul play, the county naturally is to assume all the costs. The court made him sign a bond to that effect—a regular indemnifying bond. The old man has hired two detectives from Chicago to come down here and take active charge of the work. I hope you won't have any hard feelings toward me, Baxter. I am only doing my duty as ordered by the court."

"Not the slightest feeling in the world, Sheriff," said Oliver warmly. "I wish you would do me a favor, however. The next time you see my uncle, please remind him that my offer to give him five thousand dollars if he finds my poor father—dead or alive—still holds. You can start digging whenever you are ready, Sheriff. You are at liberty to ransack the house and outbuildings, dig up the cellars, pull up the floors, drain the cistern and well—do anything you like, sir; I sha'n't interfere. If any damage is done to the property, however, I shall be obliged to compel my uncle to pay for it. Don't forget to tell him that, will you?"

The sheriff grinned. “I wonder if this old bird knows how many votes he’s going to lose by this sort of thing.”

Oliver frowned. “His scheme is to throw suspicion on me, Sheriff. That’s what he is after. It is possible that a good many people will hesitate about voting for a man who is suspected of killing his own father.”

“Don’t you worry, Baxter,” cried the sheriff, slapping the young man on the back. “My wife was talking to a prominent county official this morning—a good Democrat and a candidate for reëlection—and she made him promise not to vote for old Horace Gooch next November. She made him swear on his sacred word of honor not to do it. He went even further and swore he would vote for you, and it will be the first time he has ever voted for a Republican. Well, so long. Here’s a reporter for the *Evening Tribune* waiting to interview you. He came down with me. He’s a nice feller and he’ll give you a square deal in spite of the fact his paper is opposed to you politically. Of course, he’ll have to play this business up, so don’t get sore if you see your name in the headlines to-night.”

“I sha’n’t,” said Oliver, but more soberly than before. “I suppose there won’t be a day from now on that there isn’t something in the papers about the sensational Baxter case. I tell you, Sheriff, it hurts. I may act as if it doesn’t hurt—but it does.”

“I know it does, Baxter,” said the sheriff sympathetically. “I’m sorry—mighty sorry.”

Fully a week passed before a move was made by the authorities. The newspapers devoted considerable first page space to the new angle in the unsolved Baxter mystery, but not one of them took the matter up editorially. The principal Democratic organ, *The Tribune*, hinted at a possible disclosure, but went no farther; the Republican sheets withheld their fire until the time seemed ripe to open up on old man Gooch.

Notwithstanding the reticence of the press, the news spread like wildfire that Horace Gooch was actually charging his nephew with the murder of his father. The town of Rumley went wild with anger and indignation. A few hotheads talked of tar and feathers for old man Gooch.

And yet deep down in the soul of every one who cried out against Horace Gooch’s malevolence lurked a strange uneasiness that could not be shaken off. The excitement over the return of Mrs. Sage was short-lived on account of the new and startling turn in the Baxter mystery. Acute interest in the pastor’s wife dwindled into a mild, almost innocuous form of curiosity.

At best, she was a three days' wonder. If she had lived up to expectations by appearing on the streets in startling gowns and hats, or if she had behaved in public as actresses are supposed to behave, she might have held her own against the odds; but she did none of these. She wore what the women of the town called very unstylish clothes; she behaved with sickening propriety; she was a real disappointment. People began to wonder what on earth all those trunks contained that Joe O'Brien had hauled up to the parsonage. If they contained clothes, where was she keeping them and why didn't she put them on once in a while?

Ladies of the congregation, after a dignified season of hesitation, called on her—that is to say, after forty-eight hours—and were told by the servant that Miss Judge was not at home. She would be at home only on Thursdays from three to six. Some little confusion was caused by the name, but this was satisfactorily straightened out by the servant who explained that Miss Judge and Mrs. Sage were one and the same person, and that she was married all right and proper except, as you might say, in name. Mrs. Serepta Grimes, being an old friend, was one of the first to call. And this is what she said to Oliver October that same evening:

"You ask me, did I see her? I did. I saw her sitting at a window upstairs as I came up the walk. She didn't try to hide. She just sat there reading a book. I told the hired girl to say who it was and that I'd just as soon come upstairs as not if she didn't feel like coming down. The girl said she wasn't home—and wouldn't be till Thursday. So I says, 'You go up and tell her it's me.' In a minute or two she came back and told me the bare-facedest lie I ever heard. She knew she was lying, because I never saw a human being turn as red in the face as she did. She said Mrs. Sage wasn't at home. She said Mrs. Sage asked her to say would I please come on Thursday next and have tea with her. She said Thursday was her day. Well, do you know what I did, Oliver? I just said 'pooh' and walked right up the stairs and into her room. She got right up and kissed me five or six times and—well, that's about all, except I stayed so long I was afraid I'd be late for supper. She's a caution, isn't she? I declare I don't know when I've had a better time. She didn't talk of anything else but you, Oliver. She thinks you're the finest—"

"Did you see Jane?" broke in Oliver.

"Certainly. Don't you want to hear what Josephine said about you?"

"No, I can't say that I do. By the way, Aunt Serepta, there is something I've been wanting to ask you for quite awhile. Do you think Jane is pretty?"

Mrs. Grimes pondered. “Well,” she said judicially, “it depends on what you mean by pretty. Do you mean, is she beautiful?”

“I suppose that’s what I mean.”

“What do you want to know for?”

“Eh?”

“I mean, what’s the sense of asking me that question? You wouldn’t believe me if I said she wasn’t pretty, would you?”

“Well, I’d just like to know whether you agree with me or not.”

“Yes, sir,” said she, fixing him with an accusing eye; “I do agree with you—absolutely.”

“The strange thing about it,” he pursued defensively, “is that I never thought of her as being especially good-looking until recently. Funny, isn’t it?”

“There are a lot of things we don’t notice,” said she, “until some one else pinches us. Then we open our eyes. I guess some one must have pinched you. It hurts more when a man pinches you—’specially a big strong fellow like Doc Lansing.”

A pained expression came into Oliver’s eyes. “The trouble is, I’ve always looked upon her as a—well, as a sort of sister or something like that. We grew up just like brother and sister. How was I to know that she was pretty? A fellow never thinks of his sister as being pretty, does he?”

“I suppose not. But, on the other hand, he never loses his appetite and mopes and has the blues if his sister happens to take a fancy to a man who isn’t her brother. That’s what you’ve been doing for two or three weeks. If you had the least bit of gumption you’d up and tell her you can’t stand being a brother to her any longer and you’d like to be something else—if it isn’t too late.”

“Gee!” exclaimed he, ruefully. “But suppose she was to say it is too late?”

“That’s a nice way for a soldier to talk,” said Mrs. Grimes scathingly.

He saw very little of Jane during the days that followed Mrs. Sage’s return. Her mother demanded much of her; she was constantly in attendance upon the pampered lady. Oliver chafed. He complained to Jane on one of the rare occasions when they were alone together.

"Why, you're nothing but a lady's maid, Jane. You've been home five days and I haven't had a chance to say ten words to you. Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm fond of Aunt Josephine. She's great fun, but, hang it all, she's right smack in the center of the stage all the time. It isn't fair, Jane. You can't go on being a slave to her. She—"

"She has always had some one to wait on her, Oliver," said Jane. "I don't mind. I am really very fond of her. And she is just beginning to care for me. At first, I think she was a little afraid of me. She couldn't believe that I was real. The other day—in Chicago—she suddenly reached out and touched my arm and said: 'It doesn't seem possible that you ever squalled and made the night hideous for me and your poor father. I can't believe that you are the same little baby I used to fondle and spank when I wasn't any older than you are now.' Besides, Oliver, I like doing things for her. It makes father happy."

"But it doesn't make me happy," he grumbled. Then his face brightened. "Wasn't she great last night when she got started on Uncle Horace and—and all this hullabaloo he's stirring up?"

The fourth day after his wife's return to Rumley, Mr. Sage blurted out the question that had lain captive in his mind for weeks.

"If it is a fair question, my dear, would you mind telling me just why you came back to me?"

She leaned back in her chair and studied the ceiling for a few minutes before answering.

"I may as well be honest about it, Herby," she said, changing her position to meet his perplexed gaze with one that was absolutely free from guile. "I came back because they were through with me over there. I was getting passé—in fact, I was quite passé. They were beginning to cast me for old women and character parts. Two or three years ago they started my funeral services by seeing what I could do with Shakespeare. I played Rosalind and Viola with considerable success. The next season they had me do Lady Macbeth, and last season there was talk of reviving Camille with me in the title rôle. I was through. My musical comedy days were over. The stage was crowded with young women who could dance without wheezing like a horse with the heaves and whose voices didn't crack in the middle register. People didn't want to see me in musical comedy any longer and they *wouldn't* see me in anything else. I'm fifty-three, Herbert—between you and me, mind you—and just the right age to be a preacher's wife. So I made up my mind to retire. I used to have a hundred pounds a week. Good pay over there. I was offered twenty pounds a week for this season to tour

the provinces in a revival of Peter Pan—and that was the last straw. Peter Pan! When an actress gets so old that she can't stand on one leg without expecting people to applaud her for a feat of daring, they send her out into the woods to revive poor Peter, the boy who isn't allowed to grow old. You notice, Herby, I didn't cable to ask if I could come home—I cabled that I was on the way. Now, you know the secret of my home-coming. The time has come when I must submit to being buried alive, and I'd sooner be buried alive in Rumley than in London. It's greener here. Besides you are a human Rock of Ages, Herby. I'm going to cling to you like a barnacle. I haven't forgotten what lovers and sweethearts we were in the old days. I've been faithful to you, old dear. If I hadn't been faithful to you I would never have come back. By the way, I've put by a little money—quite a sum, in fact—so you mustn't regard me as a charity patient. We'll pool our resources. And when the time comes for you to step down and out of the pulpit for the same reason that I chucked the stage—you see, Herby, audiences and congregations are a good deal alike—why, we'll have enough to live on for the rest of our days. You won't have to write sermons and preach 'em, and I sha'n't have to listen to them. It's an awful thing to say, but we'll both have to mend our ways if we want our grandchildren to love us."

He laid his arm over her shoulder and gently caressed her cheek.

"You are still pretty much of a pagan, Jo," was all that he said, but he was smiling.

"But you are jolly well pleased to have me back, aren't you?"

"More overjoyed than I can tell you."

"No doubts, no misgivings, no uneasiness over what I may do or say to shock the worshipers?"

"I have confidence in your ability as an actress, Josephine," he said. "I am sure you can play the part of a lady as well as anything else."

She flushed. "Score one," she said. Then she sprang to her feet, the old light of mischief in her wonderful eyes. "But, my God, Herby, what's going to happen when I spring all my spangles on the innocent public?"

"I shudder when I think of it," said he, lifting his eyes heavenward.

"I saved every respectable costume I've worn in the last ten years—and some that are shocking. Twelve trunks full of them. I'll knock their eyes out when I come on as the Princess Jalinka—last act glorification—and as for the gold and turquoise gown that caused old London to blink its weary eyes

and catch its jaded breath—my word, Herby, old thing, they'll have me up for wholesale murder. They'll die all over the place."

"I really ought to caution you, Josephine—"

"Never mind, old dear. I sha'n't disgrace you. I've got a few costumes I will put on in private for you—and I wouldn't feel safe in putting 'em on privately for any one except a preacher in whom I had the most unusual confidence. Bless your heart, Herby, don't look so horrified. I've still got my marriage certificate—though God only knows where it is."

He cleared his throat. "I've got it, my dear. You neglected to take it away with you when you left."

She smiled. "Well, I daresay it was safer with you than it would have been with me."

CHAPTER XX

DETECTIVE MALONE

It was the fourth week in September when the detectives arrived in Rumley; Oliver's dredgers had completed their contract; the swamp was clear of men, machines and horses.

The city editor of the *Despatch* interviewed Detective Malone, the chief operative in charge of what the newspaper man and others, including Oliver October, were jocosely inclined to classify as the "expedition."

"Where do you intend to begin excavating, Mr. Malone?" inquired the editor, notebook in hand. They were in the lobby of the Hubbard House. "And when?" he added.

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 to-morrow or next day and put your ear to the ground—and hold it there long enough—you'll hear men's voices but you won't understand a word they say. They'll be speakin' Chinese. We've got thirty-five thousand coolies digging their way up from Shanghai, and according to schedule they ought to be here by to-morrow morning unless they've had a cave-in or stopped off in hell for breakfast."

The editor eyed him in a cold, inimical manner. "Umph!" he grunted, flopping 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. That's how we feel about this business, Mr. Malone—rich and poor, high and low. There isn't a dago here who will lift a spade to help you."

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

"You won't find anything."

Mr. Malone grinned. "Exactly what those two old codgers out there on the sidewalk said to me not ten minutes ago."

That afternoon the sheriff and the prosecuting attorney stopped electioneering long enough to pay a hasty visit to Rumley. They found Oliver waiting for them at his home.

"Of course, Mr. Baxter," said the prosecutor, "you have a right to refuse to answer every question I put to you. So far as I am concerned, I merely intend to examine you as I would examine any disinterested witness. As I say, you may decline to answer."

"I will answer any question you may choose to put to me, Mr. Johnson."

The sheriff interposed. "Better have your lawyer here, Baxter. I am obliged to warn you that anything you say may be used against you in case —er—in case—"

"I understand. In case I am charged with crime."

"Exactly," said the sheriff.

"You can refuse to answer on the ground that it may tend to incriminate you," explained the prosecutor.

"I have consulted a lawyer," said Oliver. "He advises me to help you in every way possible, Mr. Johnson. He wanted to be here this afternoon, but I told him I knew of no surer way to incriminate myself than to hire a lawyer to see that I didn't. Go ahead; ask all the questions you like. No one wants to see this mystery cleared up more than I do."

Half an hour later, the sheriff looked at his watch and reminded his companion that they would be late for the meeting at Monrovia if they didn't start at once—and off they sped in haste. 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. We are not to leave a stone unturned. 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. He had been out at the back of the house, surveying with his eye the stretch of swamp land. "It is 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.

"We'll go out and take a walk around the swamp to-morrow," said Malone. "If you've got the time to spare, Mr. Baxter, you might stroll out

with us now to the place where you last saw your father. That will have to be our starting point. Then I'll want to question your servants. It seems that he is supposed to have come home to change his clothes after he said good-by to you."

"He did not say good-by to me," corrected Oliver. "He didn't even say good night. Please get that straight, Mr. Malone. He was angry with me—and I do not deny that I was angry myself. We parted in anger."

"Do you know a man named Peter Hines, Mr. Baxter?" asked Malone abruptly.

"Pete Hines? Certainly. He is a tenant of my father's. Lives in a shack up at the other end of the swamp. He has done odd jobs for us ever since I can remember. Wood-chopping, rail-splitting and all that. 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. He's that kind."

"Do you remember seeing him the night your father disappeared?"

"No. I did not see him."

"By the way, have you ever seen me before to-day?"

"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've done quite a bit of sleuthing, as they say in the dime novels. I'm the fellow that sold your housekeeper, Mrs. Grimes, the beautifully illustrated set of Jane Austen's works day before yesterday. I also sold an unexpurgated set of the Arabian Nights to Mr. Samuel Parr, the insurance agent. He tells me your father carried a fifteen thousand dollar life policy. I tried to sell a set of Dickens to the Reverend Mr. Sage, and succeeded in having a long talk with his daughter about the book entitled 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood.' That led up, quite naturally, to the mystery of Oliver Baxter. 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—but as it is understood that no payments are to be made until the first two volumes are delivered, I can't be charged with swindling. I can face my victims with perfect equanimity—but I don't believe they'll recognize me. I was in your store last Tuesday, but

you were off on political business. Shall we stroll down to the swamp, Mr. Baxter, or would you rather wait a day or two? Suit your own convenience. We're in no hurry, you see."

"That 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. If you venture out beyond the safety zone you do so at your own risk."

"Right-o!" said Malone cheerily. They were well around the corner of the house on their way to the swamp road before he spoke again. "How many people have lost their lives out there?" he inquired.

"None, so far as I know."

"But there must have been any number of men who have ventured out there."

"What makes you think so? I don't know of a single soul who has had the courage—or the folly—to go anywhere near those sink-holes."

"Then, how do you know that those so-called bottomless holes exist?"

"I suppose it's tradition," said Oliver. "I have heard of animals—such as horses and cattle—sinking out of sight. My father has often told me of such things."

"Maybe he was just scaring you, so's you'd keep out of the swamp."

"Well, he scared me all right."

"You are a trained civil engineer, I understand."

"Yes."

"And you've never gone out there to satisfy yourself whether those pits are real or just something people like to talk about?"

"I've never been out beyond that row of posts you see over there," said Oliver, pointing. "I had a wire fence stretched along those posts last spring, Mr. Malone. You are at liberty to go as far out as you please, however."

"I shall," said Malone crisply. "I am an old hand at this business. I don't believe such a thing exists as a bottomless pit. Before I get through with this job, you will find, Mr. Baxter, that there isn't a spot in that slough out there that is more than six or eight feet deep. Of course, that is deep enough to bury a man, or a horse or a cow. So, you needn't expect me to step into every mud puddle I come across out there, just to see if it's over my shoe

tops. 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 over 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 he, 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? I don't remember ever having mentioned it. As a matter of fact, I'd forgotten it completely. 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. To the bend on ahead about fifty yards. We stood there arguing for nearly half an hour. I left him standing there. I went on to Mr. Sage's. 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 Pete 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. I went out to see him yesterday, but his shack was boarded up and there was no sign of him anywhere. Now this may interest you. There was—and still is, as far as I know—a piece of pasteboard tacked on his front door, with these words printed on it in lead pencil: 'Beware. This house is full of snakes.' That bears out your statement that he is never completely sober, Mr. Baxter. Now, you say this is the place where you parted that night—here at the turn. You left him standing here, you say. In the middle of the road?"

"Yes."

"And you walked off in this direction. Did you look back?"

"I did not."

"Just kept right on—in the middle of the road, eh?"

"That's right."

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. Of all

the bunk I ever heard, that's the worst. Mr. Gooch says he was present when she told your fortune that night."

"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 wish you had mentioned it, Mr. Baxter. This could have waited till another day. 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. There he is, over near the wire fence. 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. Cards on the table, sir, all the way through. We're looking for a dead man, not a live one, if you see what I mean."

"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. Besides, you ought to take into account the fact that this part of the swamp was not drained at the time my father disappeared. There were a lot of chuck-holes and mud flats between here and that wire fence."

"I've taken that into account—mud and everything," 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 damned 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 am sorry I spoke to you as I did, Mr. Malone. I hope you will 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."

"It's my infernal temper," explained Oliver, taking the man's hand. "You would think that after twenty years' training of the most drastic character I might be able to control it, wouldn't you? But every once in a while it slips."

"Well, there's no hard feelings on my part. Still I hope you don't mind my saying that a lot of men have tried to knock my block off without success."

"All the more reason why I should apologize," said Oliver, with his old, disarming smile.

"Forget it," said Mr. Malone magnanimously.

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 in a chair nearby. The guests were late.

"It's Josephine Sage," she observed crossly, breaking a long silence. Oliver was startled out of his reflections. "She's the one that's making 'em late. Mr. Sage was telling me the other day that actresses are always late to a party. He's just got onto it, he says. He says it's what they call an entrance, though what that means I don't know."

He looked at his watch. "It's only half-past seven, Aunt Serepta. They're only fifteen minutes late. 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.

"Did you know that Pete Hines has gone away?"

"I didn't even know he'd come back," said she.

"Come back? What do you mean?"

“He was away all last week. They say he’s making corn whisky somewhere up in the hills back of Crow Center. At any rate, he’s been peddling it around town for a couple of months.”

“I thought it was gasolene he’s been selling.”

“Maybe that’s why Abel Conroy calls it fire-water. 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—almost what might be called a tender stop—in precisely the right spot. Oliver reached out his hand and opened the front door of the car without changing his position so much as an inch.

“Perfect!” said Mrs. Sage, who sat beside the driver.

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

“So sorry to be late,” said she, as Oliver ceremoniously handed her out of the car. “Good evening, Mrs. Grimes. Is the soup cold?”

“It was all Sammy’s fault,” cried Sammy’s wife. “He poked along at only forty miles an hour.”

“Bless my soul,” said Mr. Sage, drawing his first full, free breath; “we were exactly three minutes coming from my house to—”

“Had to slow down a bit on Clay Street,” explained Sammy. “Evening, Mrs. Grimes. Step lively, Muriel! You’re holding up the procession.” He gave two short, imperative honks. “That means full speed ahead.”

“What is this 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 this ridiculous search to-morrow?”

“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. “Was that man a detective?” She was startled.

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

“The—the beast!” she cried hotly. “Good heavens! That accounts for the interest he took in your father’s disappearance. Oh, dear me, I—I wonder

what I said to him! He was so pleasant and so interested."

"You're not the only one he fooled, Jane. He got Sammy for a set of books and Aunt Serepta and Mr. Lansing—and I daresay he talked about the case with every one of them. I haven't had the nerve to spring it on Aunt Serepta. She's so happy over the prospect of getting Jane Austen with illustrations, that she'll die when she hears she's been tricked."

"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 as 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, with some of the gosh-darnedest illustrations you ever—"

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

"Sh! Not so loud. My wife doesn't know a thing about it. I'll have to keep 'em at the office. In the safe. But say, who told you about it?"

"It's all over town," said Oliver mendaciously.

"Gee whiz!" gulped Sammy. "Impossible! It's a dead secret. He said he could be arrested for selling 'em—"

"Aha!" broke in Oliver. "That explains everything. The man who told me is a detective."

"Oh, for the Lord's sake!" whispered Sammy in great agitation. Then in a tone of relief: "Oh, but I'm all right. All I've got to do is to cancel the order. I wasn't to pay anything until—What's the joke?"

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

"Say, I wish I could remember what I said to that guy about—about your father. Lord, he had me talking a blue streak. Darn my fool 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 about the books, old boy. You’ll never get them. I say, have you ever seen anything as gorgeous as Mrs. Sage is to-night?”

“Knocked me cold when she came down the parsonage steps,” said Sammy. “The Queen of Sheba never had anything on her, Ollie. I was standing at the bottom of the steps with Jane. Mr. Sage was out on the sidewalk chinning with Muriel. Jane and I joshed along for ten or twelve minutes, waiting for Mrs. Sage—I mean, Miss Judge. Suddenly the servant popped out and held the screen door open. She was carrying that blue opera wrap you saw on Mrs. Sage just now. Half a minute later, out strolled Mrs. Sage, walking as slowly as if she were following a coffin filled with royalty. I lost consciousness—honest to God I did. Wait till you see her! She’s dressed in pure silver from head to foot. When I came to she was standing right under the porch light, holding out her arms for the girl to slip on the opera coat, and she was bowing to Jane and me all over the place besides. ‘Good evening, Samuel,’ she said in a voice such as I’ve never heard before—it was so deep and musical. And say, boy! She’s got a figure! I don’t know how old she is, but all the same she’s got Venus backed off the boards. I’ll bet my last dollar if you was to put a dress on Venus she’d look like a cripple alongside of Mrs. S. Wait a second. There’s no rush, and I want to prepare you. Well, sir, she starts down the steps—me standing there with my mouth open and batting my eyes. She reaches down and lifts her skirt up to her knees and wraps it around them, and, by gosh, Ollie, she’s got on silver slippers and light blue stockings with diamond garters—”

“Sammy!” piped a shrill, commanding voice from the doorway above. “Hustle along! Don’t be all night. You can talk politics with Oliver after dinner.”

“Politics!” muttered Sammy, rolling his eyes. “And to see her in her street clothes you’d swear she hadn’t as much shape or style as—all right, Muriel! Coming!”

CHAPTER XXI

LOVE WITHOUT JEALOUSY

The young men entered the sitting-room. Mrs. Sage was standing almost directly under the chandelier, talking to dumpy little Mrs. Grimes; the light from above fell upon her auburn crown, flooded her magnificent shoulders and arms, and then wavered timidly, almost helplessly, as it first came in contact with resplendent opposition. The actress was a head taller than Mrs. Grimes, who nevertheless bravely stood her ground and faced comparison with all the hardihood of the righteous. Oliver's housekeeper succeeded in disguising the astonishment occasioned by the gown of silver spangles, but she could not master the wonder and the admiration that filled her eyes as she gazed upon the smooth, alabaster arms and neck and bosom of the magnificent Josephine. Nor could she understand the soft, warm cheeks, or the dusky shadows under the sparkling eyes, or the moist black lashes that sometimes veiled them.

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, his hands behind his back, his feet spread slightly apart the better to allow him the unctuous relaxation of frequently rising on his toes and then slowly settling back upon his heels again—another and simple means of indicating partnership in pulchritude.

"I can remember when there wasn't a dinner jacket or a dress suit in Rumley," said Josephine as the two tall young men approached. "And the only men who parted their hair in the middle were the ones who didn't have any hair in the middle at all, at all. Most of the male member's of Herbert's congregation left the price tags on their Sunday suits for a whole winter so that people could tell when they were dressed up. Do you mean to tell me, Oliver, that those blighters intend to begin digging up your place to-morrow?"

The mere thought of it caused her to waft her handkerchief in front of her nose, stirring the air with the rare, pungent odor of *nuit de chine*.

Oliver laughed. "I think we'll all rather enjoy the excitement, Aunt Josephine," he said. "Besides, now that I am in politics, I want to keep as much in the limelight as possible. I suppose they'll begin prying up the

kitchen floor to-morrow, or digging trenches in the cellar, or tearing up the flower-beds. It will be worth coming miles to see."

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

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

"There will be trouble," said Mrs. Grimes, the light of battle in her eye, "if they make a mess around this house."

"Aunt Serepta will fix 'em," said Oliver, putting his arm around the little woman's shoulders. "Won't you, Auntie?"

"She'll boil 'em in oil," said Sammy, very gravely.

Oliver 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. Without a word, he left Mrs. Sage and went to Jane.

"Don't worry," he said to her in a low tone. "You couldn't have said anything to Malone that—"

"It isn't that," she interrupted nervously. "It is the feeling that we are all being spied upon." She hesitated a moment. "I remember one thing. He asked me what kind of a night it was."

"Well, there wasn't any harm in telling him, was there?" he chided. "That is, if you remembered."

"I do remember. He said that some one had told him it was a rainy, stormy night. I assured him he had been misinformed—that it hadn't rained for weeks. He—he seemed surprised."

"Well, what of that?"

Her wide-set gray eyes wavered. They steadied instantly, however, and she smiled—a confident, disarming smile.

"I suppose it's the finding out that he was a detective and that he was pumping me," she explained.

"Anyhow, you are smiling again," he half whispered, "and that makes me want to sing and dance for joy." He was once more aware that his voice was throaty and unsteady.

A faint wave of color spread to her cheek and brow, but she did not look away. When she spoke again it was at the conclusion of a long, deep exhalation; the sentence ended in a fluttering, breathless murmur.

"Don't you think mother is perfectly wonderful, Oliver?"

He nodded. He felt that he could not trust his voice. He knew now that he was in love—that he always had been in love with Jane, that he always would be 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 away 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.

Mr. Sage was speaking to Mrs. Sammy. "Yes, my dear Muriel, I can't quite believe I am awake. It all seems like a dream."

His wife not only overheard this remark but obviously the one that led up to it.

"Oh, I say, old dear," she exclaimed, "you must get over the notion that you are asleep. It's not complimentary to me to have you going about everywhere pinching yourself to see whether you're awake or not. And the worst of it is, he pinches me every now and then to see whether I am flesh and blood or merely a hallucination."

Sammy cleared his throat gallantly. "Permit me to say, Miss Judge, that you *are* a dream, and if I was Mr. Sage I'd *never* wake up."

She lifted her lorgnon and regarded him with languid interest. "After that, my dear Sammy, I am sure your wife will like me much better if you call me Aunt Josephine. Even though I am old enough to be your mother, I—Why, when I look at Jane I doubt my own eyes. That I, Josephine Judge, should have a daughter as big as Jane is more than I can grasp. I am filled with wonder. I—"

"It's more of a wonder, Josephine Sage," broke in Mrs. Grimes tartly, "that you haven't got any grandchildren."

"My dear Mrs. Grimes, don't blame me for that," said Josephine.

“Supper’s ready,” shouted Lizzie Meggs, the “help” from the center of the dining-room. Lizzie had a strong voice and she believed in using it. It saved her many a needless step. She was nearly thirty and thought she was good enough for Oliver, or any other young man in Rumley. Her parents brought her up in just that way—with the aid of the movies.

At table the conversation quite naturally dealt with the advent of the detectives and the task that had been set for them by the universally despised Mr. Gooch.

“It’s all bally nonsense,” said Mrs. Sage, at Oliver’s right. “Your father will turn up one day and—Why, look at me. Didn’t I turn up? Didn’t I come back? Here am I as big as life, after twenty-three years, and dear old Herbert goes about the house all day long saying that nothing—absolutely nothing is impossible.”

“Well, you see, Aunt Josephine,” began Oliver, in his good-humored drawl, “Uncle Herbert did an awful lot of praying.”

“Morning and night I prayed,” said Mr. Sage earnestly. “I prayed, and then I prayed that my prayers might be answered. God saw fit to—”

“My dear Herbert, when a woman reaches my age she begins to appreciate the advantages of a husband. If she hasn’t got one, she begins desperately to look for one. I could have had a dozen or more if I’d been of a mind, but those were in the days when husbands were looking for me. I mean other women’s husbands. When it so happens, as in my case, that a perfectly good and reliable husband has been mislaid in the haste and confusion of youth, why, Fortune smiles, that’s all. It wasn’t your praying. I should have come back if you hadn’t prayed a lick.”

“Do not say that, Josephine. I have already begun to pray that you will never go away again.”

“Don’t let me catch you at it, old dear,” she warned. “I dare say I shall get jolly well fed up with Rumley, especially after Jane is married. Besides, I am living in the hope that you may get a call to Chicago or New York.”

“I shall never leave Rumley, Josephine.”

“That’s what I said about London.”

“What was that you said about Jane?” demanded Oliver.

“Jane? Oh, yes; about her getting married? She absolutely refuses to tell me who she is going to marry. I fancy I can make a fairly good guess, however.”

"So can I," cried Mrs. Sammy. "Oh, you Jane!"

Oliver swallowed hard. "How about it, Jane? Come on! 'Fess up. You're among friends."

Jane smiled mischievously. "I promise, Oliver, to tell you first of all. I sha'n't keep you in suspense any longer than I can help."

"Before you tell your own mother," cried Josephine.

"Much as I love you, Mother dear, I feel that I must tell Oliver first. He is my oldest and best friend."

"I have just been thinking, Josephine," began Mr. Sage, guiltily and irrelevantly, "that I quite forgot to take Henry the Eighth out for his walk this evening. And even worse, I fear I left him hanging by his lead from the top peg of the hatrack."

"I really shouldn't mind, my dear, if he were to expire before we get home," said she. "He is a traitor. Would you believe it, Oliver, the little beast has taken such a fancy to your Uncle Herbert that he has completely turned against me. Snaps at me, growls at me, barks at me every time I try to pat him. Hanging is too good for him."

"Speaking of hanging," said Sammy, "old Joe Sikes says he's got a perfect alibi for you, Ollie, in connection with that murder up in Grand Rapids. I mean the chap who was found in a hotel room last night with his throat cut. Joe says he can prove by thirty reputable witnesses that you were not within four hundred miles of Grand Rapids last night."

Oliver grinned. "That's all he and Silas Link think about these days—fixing up alibis for me. They grab up the morning paper to see where the latest murder has occurred and then they hustle out and establish an alibi for me."

"How perfectly delicious," cried little Mrs. Sammy. "Don't you think it is really perfectly delicious, Mr. Sage?"

"I beg your pardon?" stammered the pastor apologetically. "I am afraid I was thinking about Henry the Eighth."

"Oh, you are *so* literary, Mr. Sage," shrieked Mrs. Sammy admiringly.

Oliver was strangely restless during dinner, and immediately after the company arose 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 upon 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 seeming 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 on 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 little air. It seemed an age to her before he spoke.

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

“I don’t know just what you mean.”

“I mean, supposing they find my father out there in the swamp and there are indications that he met with foul play, and I stand the chance of being accused—”

“Don’t be silly,” she cried.

“Well—would you ask her?”

“There couldn’t be any harm in asking her. She could refuse you, you know.”

“That’s so. She could, couldn’t she. I—I hadn’t thought of that. Still you said you were going to marry the first man who asks you.”

“Yes, Oliver, I am—but, of course, I am expecting the man I love to ask me.”

“There’s the gypsy’s prophecy,” he murmured thickly. “It—it may come true, Jane.”

“It—it cannot come true,” she cried. “It cannot, Oliver.”

“Still it is something to be considered,” he said heavily and judicially. His hand closed over hers and gripped it tightly. “If you were in my place wouldn’t 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. Her warm, supple body suddenly and mysteriously became that of another woman—a strange woman so unlike Jane that his

senses swam with wonder. What magic was this? This was not Jane—not the Jane he had known forever! Something incredibly feminine, sensuous, intoxicating—His arms went about her and drew her close.

"God! Is—is this you, Jane?" he whispered. "Is it really you?"

She lifted her head. A little sob of joy broke on her lips. Gazing up into his eyes, bright even in the darkness, she murmured a bewildered question.

"Yes—you are some other girl," he replied, dazed by ecstasy. "You can't be Jane Sage. You don't feel like Jane Sage. You don't—"

She laughed softly. "Do you think you ought to be holding a strange girl in your arms—and do you think I could possibly allow you to do it if I were not Jane Sage?" A pause, then, faintly: "Oh, Oliver—dear Oliver!"

"You—you are sure there isn't any one else, Janie? I—I am not too late? Tell me."

"There never has been any one else, Oliver. It has always been you."

"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. That's why I've never asked any one else to—to marry me. I understand now why I couldn't possibly have asked any one else. All these years it has been you—and I never knew. It was settled long ago—ages ago, without my knowing it, that there was but one girl I could ever ask to be my wife—only one girl that I could ever really love." He drew in a deep, long, quivering breath.

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. That was twenty years ago. I have been true to you ever since—all these years I have been a true and faithful wife." Their lips met—their first kiss of passion, of love exalted. Then, a little later on, breathlessly: "Do you realize that this is the first time you have kissed your wife since she was ten years old?"

He kissed her again, rapturously. "It—it wasn't like this when you were ten, Janie darling—nothing like this! 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 give me the

chance to say I loved you, Oliver—I wasn't sure you would 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 that lined the road below them.

"I didn't hear anything," said he, turning with her. "It must have been my heart trying to burst out of its—"

"I heard some one—or some thing," she said, in a voice of dismay. "Oh, Oliver, some one saw you kiss me, some one heard what we—"

"Suppose he did," cried he jubilantly. "Why should we care? I'd like the whole world to know how happy—how absolutely happy—I am, Jane. I've half a notion to start out right now and run through the streets shouting that I'm in love with you and am going to marry you. When will you marry me, Jane? *When?*"

The woman in her replied. "I must have time to get some clothes and—"

"You don't need any," he broke in. "I mean any more than you have now. I'm not marrying your clothes, dear—I'm marrying *you*. Sh! Listen! There *is* some one over there in the brush. Damn his sneaking eyes! I'll—"

"Don't! Don't go down there!" she cried, clutching his arm. "You must not leave me alone. I'm—I'm afraid, Ollie. I am always afraid when I am near that awful swamp. No matter if some one did see us. Let him go. Besides, it may have been a dog or some other animal—"

"Let's walk down the road a little way, Jane," said he stubbornly. "Don't be afraid. I'll stick close beside you."

"You won't go down into the swamp?" she cried anxiously.

"No. Just along the road."

They ran down the little embankment into the road. She clung tightly to his arm, feeling strangely secure in the rigid strength of it—and proud of it, as well. The night was dark, the road among the trees darker still. After fifteen or twenty paces, Oliver pressed her arm warningly and stopped to listen. Ahead of them, some distance away, they heard footfalls—the slow, regular tread of a man walking in the road.

“I will not go a step farther,” she whispered, holding back as he started to go forward.

He submitted. They stood still, listening. Suddenly the footfalls ceased.

“He knows we have stopped,” said Oliver. “He’s listening to see if we are following.”

She was silent for a moment. “You remember what I said about being spied upon, Oliver. I feel it, I feel it all about me. You are being watched all the time, Oliver. Oh, how hateful, how unfair!”

He put his arm around her. “Jane dear, I am just beginning to understand. They really suspect me. They really think I may have had a hand in—Why, curse them, they—”

“Hush, Oliver!” she cried softly. “The very worst thing you can do is to fly into a rage over this silly—”

“Oh, my Lord!” he gasped, drawing back in sheer astonishment. “*You* too, Jane? I’ve heard nothing for twenty years but—Hang it all, dear, I *want* to get mad! I want to rage like a lion and tear things to pieces. Every time I frown the whole blamed town smooths my back and says ‘Now-now!’ And Joe Sikes and Silas Link—”

“I know, I know,” she interrupted gently. “But you mustn’t, just the same. You must treat this thing as a—a sort of joke.”

Many seconds passed before he spoke. “It’s pretty difficult to see anything humorous in being suspected of—Oh, I can’t even say it! It’s too awful—too unspeakable!”

“We’d better be going back to the house, Oliver,” she began.

“See here, Jane, I’ve been thinking. It’s wrong for me to ask you to marry me till all this mess is over. It’s wrong for me to even ask you to consider yourself engaged to me. We must wait. I mean it, dear. I’m under a cloud. There’s no getting around that fact. The—”

“Nobody believes you had anything to do with—”

“My dear girl, nobody knows *what* to believe,” said he seriously. “That’s the worst of it. My father is gone. I was, so far as any one knows, the last to see him. As you say, no one may believe that I had anything to do with it, but—*where is he?* That’s the question they are all asking—and no one answers. He is somewhere, living or dead. That’s sure. He may be out there in that swamp. And, Jane, here’s the horrible part of it. If he is out there, no

one will believe he committed suicide. No one will believe that he made way with himself deliberately. He may have wandered into the swamp while out of his head—but he was not contemplating suicide. If that had been his intention, why did he draw all that money out of the bank? A queer thing has just happened. You know Peter Hines—that queer old bird who has always lived in the cabin at the lower end of the swamp? You can see it from the road in the daytime. He has skipped out. Boarded up the door and windows and—"

He started violently, the words dying on his lips. Off to the south, beyond the almost impenetrable wall of night, gleamed far-off lights in the windows of Peter Hines's shack.

"He must have returned," he said, in an odd voice. "Those lights—"

"Let us go in, dear," she pleaded. "I—I hear something moving among the weeds down there. It's grisly, Oliver—creepy."

They were at the foot of the porch steps when he kissed her tenderly. "We must wait a little while, Janie, before telling them about—us. Till all this is cleared up and I am—"

She faced him, her hands on his shoulders.

"I shall tell them to-night," she said resolutely. "To-morrow I shall tell everybody I know. What do you think I am? A fraidy-cat?"

He laughed quietly. "Have your own way, dear. You always have had it where I am concerned. But," and here he dropped into his dry, whimsical drawl, "if I were you I wouldn't begin getting a trousseau together until after my birthday next month. You might be wasting a lot of time and money."

"Oh, Oliver, don't say such things!" she cried hotly. "I wish that old gypsy were here. I'd wring her neck!"

Mrs. Sage was holding forth in her most effective English as they entered the sitting-room. She may have eyed them narrowly for a second or two, but that was all. She had an attentive audience; the division of interest due to the return of absentees was of extremely short duration; she knew how to hold the center of the stage once she got it.

"As a matter of fact, they're shorter in Rumley than they are in London. I've seen more knees since I got back to Rumley than I saw all the time I was in London. And that, my dear Mrs. Grimes, despite the fact that London has more knees than any other city in the world. My daughter has provided me with a hundred surprises since—I don't mean that she has a hundred

knees, of course—what I mean to say is that Jane merely yawns when I begin in a hushed voice to tell her of the very latest crazes and vices of London. She yawns, I say, and proceeds to inform me that they are all old in Rumley—*old*, mind you. It really seems that just about the time poor old London is struggling to learn a new dance, Rumley is completely fed up with it. I go about in a sort of daze. I wish—I devoutly wish—I could remember all the things I've learned since I got back to Rumley. Poor Herbert maintains that—"

At this juncture Sammy Parr, who had been observing Oliver very closely, got up from his chair and marched across the room, his hand extended.

"Congratulations, old man!" he shouted joyously.

And little old Mrs. Grimes, from her place on the sofa, remarked as she leaned back with a sigh of content:

"Well, goodness knows it's about time."

Proving that since the entrance of the lovers the great Josephine had failed signally to hold her audience spellbound.

CHAPTER XXII

THE CORPUS DELICTI

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 the progress made by the authorities in 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; the unearthing of a stout spade handle at the edge of the swamp not far from where the old man and his son parted company; the turning up among the weeds at the roadside of a small notebook which, despite months of exposure to rain, snow and sun, was identified as the property of the missing man. It was Oliver October who unhesitatingly identified this notebook. He recalled that his father had made notations in it before they left the house on that all-important night. The weather had rendered these and other notes illegible.

Strange to say, Peter Hines's cabin was still boarded up. The morning after Oliver and Jane observed the motionless lights across the swamp, the former motored over to the shack. He was amazed to find the door and the windows nailed up securely; there was nothing to indicate that they had been opened or tampered with during the night. He went to Malone with the puzzle. The detective promptly declared that neither he nor his partner had been down at the shack the night before and could offer no explanation. The cabin was watched every night for a week, but the lights did not reappear.

Oliver was astonished to find that no one in Rumley was surprised by the announcement that he and Jane were engaged to be married. Apparently the whole town knew about it weeks before he himself was aware of it! Quite a number of people seemed to be frankly annoyed because they had not announced their engagement a year ago.

Meanwhile, Malone and his gang of Italian laborers were leisurely conducting the quest. The chief operative was bored. He admitted that he 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 19th 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. Some one had told him he ought to read this book. It had been recommended to him as a rattling good detective story. The only thing that kept him awake was the thud of pick-axes under the kitchen porch just beyond where he was sitting—not that he wasn't accustomed to the thuds and could have slept soundly in spite of them, but there was always the possibility that Lizzie Meggs might carry out her threat to "douse" everybody with hot water if the noise got to be more than she could bear.

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 "mudholes" 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. They had advanced across the dangerous terrain with the aid of planks, and they worked with such extreme caution that even Horace Gooch, on the one surreptitious visit he paid to the locality, was satisfied with the progress they were making: they could not possibly complete the job before election day.

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 these 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. "As I've said before, Mr. Baxter, it's all damned foolishness digging up your place like this."

"Mrs. Grimes says the house is likely to fall down on our heads at any minute," said Oliver. "How is your lumbago, Malone?"

"Better. Mrs. Grimes almost succeeded in putting a mustard plaster on me yesterday. She had me gargling my throat last week. I'm never going to complain again as long as I'm around where she is."

"By the way, 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. She says that every time she goes down for a pan

of potatoes or a jar of pickles she has to jump over a grave or two, and it's getting on her nerves."

"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 watch-dog. Give the old boy a little much needed rest. He's been sitting back there on the kitchen steps ever since one o'clock—and he's here every morning before we begin work."

Oliver walked to the corner. Joseph Sikes was sitting on the back steps, his coat collar turned up about his throat, his aged back bent almost double, his chin resting on the mittened 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 hot coffee. Work's over for to-day."

"The hell 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. Reminds me of a crabbed old hen setting on a basket of eggs. As for the other one—the chubby undertaker—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.

Two soiled Italians had crawled out from beneath the porch and were making off with their coats and dinner-pails in the direction of the barn.

"I have put it up to 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 some one else on the ticket in my place if they feel—"

"Come off! In the first place, they can't put anybody in your place now. It's too late. And in the second place, you've got old Gooch licked to a standstill, so what the devil's got into you? You must be off your nut. We're not going to find your father's body, my boy. Why? Because it isn't—"

"How do you know you are not going to find it?" was Oliver's surprising question.

Malone stared. “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. “At first I laughed at all this fuss, but lately I’ve been lying awake thinking that maybe we’ve been wrong all the time and that he is out there—My God, Malone, it—it turns the blood cold in my veins.”

“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. Don’t lay down. You’ve got this election sewed up—and say, what if we do accidentally find your old man—what’s that got to do with it? Haven’t you been looking for him for over a year? Supposing he did wander off into the swamp that night—”

“Malone, I can feel it in the air that a great many people believe I know what became of him. It’s in the air, I say. There may be people who believe that I had something to do with putting him out of the way. People like to believe the worst. The Democratic speakers are mighty decent and so are the newspapers. They haven’t uttered a word or printed one that isn’t fair and square. But back in the minds of a lot of people is the thought that perhaps, after all, I did murder my father. You can’t blame—”

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. I don’t want to hear you say another word about murder, young man—not another damned word. They’ve got to dig up your father’s corpus delicti before—What in thunder are you laughing at, sir?”

Malone, to whom this question was addressed in Mr. Sikes’s most aggressive manner, put his hand to his mouth and, after a brief struggle, succeeded in replying with as straight a face as possible:

“I’ve been reading an awfully funny book, Mr. Sikes. It’s about detectives.”

Now, for the past two weeks Mr. Sikes and other overripe citizens of Rumley had made frequent and profound allusions to the corpus delicti. They didn’t know what it was at first but Mr. Link soon found out. He said it was French for “body.” Corpus delicti sounded so well—after considerable

practice—that most people preferred to use it instead of "remains"; besides, it wasn't quite so personal.

There is no telling what Mr. Sikes would have said to Mr. Malone about detectives in general if the delegation from Republican headquarters had arrived a minute or two later. He could have said a great deal in a minute or two.

The automobile came swinging up the drive on the tail of Mr. Malone's defensive explanation. Oliver hurried off to greet the occupants of the car, Mr. Sikes hobbling along in his wake. Malone refilled his pipe as he strode across the stable yard. In the lee of the barn he scorched his fingers. His gaze was fixed on the swamp. Far out in the "danger zone" a number of men were compactly grouped. A solitary figure was running toward the Baxter house, while from the main highway to the right of 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 appeared on the front porch as the three committee-men stepped out of the car. She knew one of them, James Parsons, a lawyer.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Grimes," said he, coming up the steps. "Baxter here?"

"He's around back. I'll call—"

"Just a second. I'd like a word with you in private. Hello, here he is." There were handshakings, and then Parsons motioned with his head for Serepta to remain behind as the others entered the house. "Say, have you got any influence over him, Mrs. Grimes?"

"Not a bit," said Serepta. "What have you men decided he ought to do? Drop out?"

"We've decided—the whole Central Committee—that he'd be a damned fool to drop out of the race. Excuse my French."

"With pleasure. Now, let me give you a piece of advice." She looked over her shoulder to make sure that Oliver was out of hearing. "Don't plead with him. Act as mad as you know how. Don't go in there and tell him he'd be a damned fool to drop out—excuse *my* French—don't go at him that way. Tell him he'd be an ornery, low-lifed skunk if he left you in the lurch like that. Make it strong. Nobody on earth minds being called a damned fool, Mr. Parsons, but it is something awful to be called a skunk. He is really serious

about withdrawing. You mustn't let him. All he needs is your encouragement and he'll—"

"You think it will encourage him if we call him a skunk?"

"I didn't say you were to call him one," said she tartly. "I said you were to tell him he'd *be* one."

"If you have the slightest influence—"

"I told you I haven't a bit. You men got him into this race and it's your business to keep him in it. I guess you'd better go in. They're calling you."

Mr. Sikes ambled up as Parsons disappeared through the door. He stopped short in the gravel walk just below where Mrs. Grimes was standing. After an instant's hesitation, he drew nearer to the rail, treading ruthlessly upon the frost-ravaged peony bed that skirted the porch. 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."

"He said a lot of things, Joe."

"Do you remember him telling us he was getting so he hated to go to sleep at night in this house? Maybe he said he was afraid to go to sleep, but no matter. Do you remember?"

"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 out and hang him for something he'd never done."

"I guess maybe that was it. And another thing. Didn't he say he wouldn't 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. Only somehow I've got the queerest feelin' that something's going to happen, Serepty—and I—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."

"Good gracious, man! Why should I say anything—"

"I mean," began Mr. Sikes solemnly, "if—if you was called as a witness—in court. If you was put under oath and had to testify. That's what I mean. I mean," he repeated sternly, "that you and me and Silas never heard him say anything like that—then or any other time."

"What's got into you, Joe? What do you mean by a trial in court and—"

"I'm just giving you a few instructions, Serepty, in case anything *does* happen. I've been a little worried over you, anyhow."

"Worried over me?"

"Yes. 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. Of course Silas and I would swear to a thousand of 'em if necessary, but would you? That's what's worryin' me. Would—"

"I would swear to a million of them," she cried, "if it would be any help to Oliver October."

"Birds of a feather," said Mr. Sikes, rather proudly.

An automobile, packed with men and running at a high rate of speed, flashed past the Baxter house and was almost instantly lost to sight around the bend.

"They ought to be locked up," cried Mrs. Grimes, scandalized.

Mr. Sikes seized the opportunity to utter one withering word—and on his lips it had all the ferocity of a curse.

"Prohibition!" he snarled, his voice cracking on the last syllable.

Mrs. Grimes drew her shawl a little closer about her throat.

"Seems to me it's turning a lot colder, Joe," she said.

"Better go in the house, Serepty," he advised quickly.

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

"I guess I'd better go 'round the back way, Serepty, so's not to disturb Ollie and the committee. Has he set the day for the wedding?"

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

“No, he ain’t,” said she.

“I thought he had. He’d ought to.”

“He’s not the one to do the setting, Joe Sikes. It’s none of his business. That’s the girl’s lookout. Jane has named the day, if that’s what you want to know. It’s to be the tenth of November.”

“He’s a lucky feller,” said the old man. “Think of a feller being able to get married to as purty a girl as Jane and still not have any brother-in-laws.”

“I wish you’d get tired talking about brothers-in-law all the time,” she said, severely. “Don’t forget that you are a brother-in-law yourself, Joe Sikes. You are a brother-in-law to two men and—”

“What are you trying to do, Serepty Grimes? Insult me? Make a mortal enemy out of me? For two cents I’d refuse to drink a mouthful of your coffee. And what’s more—”

“Look out yonder, Joe—in the swamp,” she broke in, pointing through the fringe of trees. “There’s a crowd—”

“Serepty!” he cried bleakly. “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?”

He groaned. “If it is, he’ll never get here. He’s too old and fat to be hurryin’ like that. He’ll drop dead. He’s got a weak heart.”

“Sit down, Joe,” she said suddenly, after a quick look at his paling face.

“I guess maybe I’d better,” he said weakly. “Just for a second or two. My legs seem sort of wobbly and—”

“Don’t sit down yet,” she cried. “Wait till we get to the steps. You’ll break a hip or something if you sit down—”

“Ain’t your legs sort of weak and—”

“No, they’re not,” she interrupted tartly. “Lean on me, Joe.”

“I’ll be dogged if I do!” he snorted vigorously. “What do you take me for? Lean on a woman! Blast your eyes, Serepty Grimes—how many more times are you going to insult me to-day? Let me tell you one thing more. I’m not going to set down as long as Silas Link is on his feet. I am no quitter!” he bellowed, squaring his broad old shoulders. “Not by a blamed sight!”

They stood and waited. In due time, Silas Link panted his way up the incline and came shuffling toward them. He stopped at the corner of the barnyard, leaning against the fence to get his breath. 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, and quickly hooked his arm through that of the tottering Mrs. Grimes.

"No telling. Unrecognizable. Been in the mire for a long time, according to my best judgment."

"Sure it's a—a human being?"

"Certainly."

"Male or female?"

"Didn't I tell you it had been in the mire for a long time?"

"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. Not a stitch. Shoes or anything. It ain't got *anything* on. Not even flesh."

"A—a skeleton?" gulped the old lady.

"No clothes on?" demanded Mr. Sikes. "Then it can't be Ollie. He had his 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, weightily.

A longer silence than 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 newsbearer, 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 over the head—”

“Say *it*,” corrected Mr. Sikes. “You don’t know whether it’s a man or woman.”

“—with a heavy instrument. Most likely an ax or a 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, covering her eyes.

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

“They’ve sent for the police and for my men,” went on Mr. Link. “And they’re telephoning for the sheriff and coroner and everybody else. Why, the news must be all over town by this time. Look at the automobiles rushing down that way—and people running on foot—and—oh, my Lord, Joe! If it should turn out to be Ollie it will—it will look mighty bad for Oliver October.”

Mr. Sikes was thoughtful. “Did you get a good look at it, Silas?”

“I did.”

“Wouldn’t you recognize Ollie’s Adam’s apple if you saw it—dead or alive?”

“Not if it had been dead as long as this one has. Your Adam’s apple ain’t a bone, Joe. It’s a cartilage.”

“A cartridge?”

“I guess we’d better tell Oliver,” said Mrs. Grimes briskly. She had, as usual, risen to the occasion.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BREWING OF THE STORM

The news spread like wildfire. Before nightfall every one in Rumley knew that the body of old 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, discussed 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 now 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 Pete 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.

Every group had its individual who professed to be able to explain away certain of these "discrepancies." He had it from persons who were in a position to know, having been present or within hearing distance when, earlier in the evening, Oliver October had accounted to the sheriff and his men (in the presence of his lawyer) for some of the suspicious features of the case. These peregrinating individuals—assuming no responsibility and by no means vouching for Oliver's veracity—informed their dubious hearers that Oliver remembered stepping into a puddle of mud and water back of Josiah Smith's house, said puddle having been created by Josiah's street sprinkling wagon which always occupied the same spot between sunset and daybreak and invariably leaked all over the unpaved alley (a claim substantiated by the town sprinkler, himself, who admitted that he left his wagon out there every night and that it did leak dreadfully up to the time he had it repaired, but who also said he was not to blame if people preferred to

walk up an alley instead of on the sidewalk). And Oliver had a very good reason for stopping the ditchers where he did: he had inspected the slough out beyond and was convinced, as an expert, that it could only be reclaimed at a far greater cost than the land was worth or ever would be worth. Moreover, the son of old man Baxter unhesitatingly and emphatically had declared that it wasn't his father's body at all, and refused point blank to have anything to do with it. The word passed up and down Clay Street that three doctors, including young Doc Lansing, had examined the corpus delicti and pronounced it to be that of a man in his seventies.

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 one thousand dollar Liberty bonds! Rumor, pure and simple, yet accepted as fact by those who roamed the streets. The old man's life insurance policy was discussed; and there was a story that he had openly threatened to make a new will, disinheriting his son. A grave, unanswered question, too, had to do with the money so lavishly spent by young Oliver—several thousand dollars in cash. Where had it come from? His father had called him a loafer, had charged him with coming back to Rumley to be supported in idleness. If Oliver had come home from the war "dead broke," how was it that he had acquired several thousand dollars in cash? Thirty-five hundred dollars in banknotes—the whole town knew that the hardware merchant had drawn that amount from the bank—and five Liberty bonds that could be readily turned into money. Eighty-five hundred dollars! Simple as rolling off a log! Ha! 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 had murdered his father.

Across the street from the Baxter Block, where Link's Undertaking Establishment was located, a morbid, motionless crowd eyed the doors guarded by two policemen. A single electric bulb at the rear of the main reception room shed a feeble and rather ghastly light over the dim interior. Every one knew that back of the reception room was the stock-room, lined with caskets standing on end behind glass doors, and beyond that was the workroom where a grim and awful thing was lying—alone!

The street leading to the Baxter residence was alive with people—curious, silent, awe-struck men and women who stared intently at the windows of the house and wondered what was going on behind the yellow

shades. The slow, solemn shuffle of aimless feet, passing, pausing and repassing the house on the knoll, began early in the evening and seemed endless. Automobiles filled with people moved slowly along the highway skirting the dark, terrifying swamp—all eyes turned toward the loathesome tract as if expecting to glimpse some ghostly reënactment of the afternoon's scene.

Inside the brightly lighted house a small company was assembled. It was not a cheerful company, nor yet a gloomy one. Acting on the advice of the delegation from Republican headquarters, Oliver reluctantly had canceled an engagement to address a mass meeting at the county seat. While no actual charge had been made against him, there was small reason to doubt that the grand jury, then in session, would bring in an indictment against him, perhaps on the morrow. The coroner, who now had charge of the body—or skeleton—had announced that he would hold an inquest on the following day. The sheriff had returned to the county seat after cautioning Oliver to keep his head and await developments.

"It looks pretty bad for you, Baxter," he had 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's 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 coming over to-morrow 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, Dr. Lansing and Mrs. Grimes. Sammy Parr was expected. He was to bring in the news of the streets.

Oliver, a trifle pale but with a stubborn frown on his brow, listened calmly to the animated conversation that went on about him. He sat beside Jane on the sofa in the corner of the room. From time to time Mr. Sikes got up—with many a groan—and poked the blazing logs in the fireplace. He too was frowning. Mr. Link was cheerful.

"If the worst comes, Bill," said the latter, repeating himself for perhaps the third time, "we can certainly prove that there is insanity in the family.

There's his uncle, old Horace Gooch. He's as crazy as a loon."

This was addressed familiarly to Judge William Shortridge, one time Justice of the Peace and now the Baxter lawyer.

Mr. Sikes snorted. "Only by marriage, only by marriage," he growled. "Insanity by marriage is no defense."

"I should like to know," put in Mrs. Sage, "what possible motive Oliver could have had for killing his father."

"Oliver has not been accused of killing his father, Madam," Judge Shortridge reminded her.

"But if he *did* kill him," announced Mr. Link earnestly—"now, mind you, I'm not even hinting that he did—but, the thing is, if he *did* do it, why, we can prove that he had the best motive in the world."

"In God's name," gasped the Judge, startled out of his judicial composure, "what are you saying, Link? What motive could he have—"

"The best motive in the world, I claim," said Mr. Link emphatically. "Insanity!"

"Don't you know that insanity is not a motive?" snapped the Judge.

"As for Pete Hines saying he heard Oliver and his father quarreling that night," said Mrs. Grimes, who had been silent for a long time, "I wouldn't believe him on oath. If I was to meet him on the street and he was to say it was a nice, bright, sunshiny day, I'd hurry home and take off my rain-soaked clothes."

"Help yourself to another cigar, Judge," said Oliver from the sofa.

"Any objections, ladies?" In turn, each lady shook her head. "I was about to say, my friends" (with a fixed stare at Mr. Link), "that in case the grand jury finds a true bill against Oliver, I consider myself, as his counsel, quite capable of deciding what kind of a defense we shall put up—and it will not be insanity, Silas Link."

"Well, what *will* it be?" demanded Mr. Link.

"Patience," returned Judge Shortridge.

"That's no defense," protested the undertaker. "Whoever heard of a man being acquitted of murder on the grounds of patience?"

"Will it make it any clearer to you if I state that all we have to do is to be patient while the State is trying to prove this absolutely unknown and

absolutely unidentified carcass is that of Oliver Baxter? We'll make 'em prove that it is his skeleton. We'll make 'em prove to the day just how long it has been out there in the swamp. We'll be able to prove that Oliver October had in the neighborhood of fifteen thousand dollars on deposit in a Chicago bank and that he spent a lot of it hunting for his father. And, as I said before, we'll make 'em prove that Oliver Baxter is dead. They'll have a hell of a time—er—a very difficult time proving that our old friend is dead. For all we know—or anybody else knows—that body may have been out there for ten or fifteen years. Doc Lansing here says it's possible, and Doctor Robinson the same thing. They can't, to save their lives, produce a medical expert who will swear positively it was out there only a year and four months. Isn't that a fact, Doc?"

"Yes," replied young Lansing. "The processes of disintegration are so __"

"And this skeleton is said to be that of a fairly tall man," said Mr. Sage, "whereas I should unhesitatingly say that Brother Baxter was not more than five feet six."

"We must not overlook the fact," said Lansing, pursing his lips, "that old age may have caused Mr. Baxter's frame to shrink somewhat from its original stature—er—ah—we all know that he was considerably bent and shriveled and that he was decidedly—er—bow-legged. Now the bone structure of a human being more or less assumes deceptive proportions after —er—the confining tissue, the cartilages and so forth have—ah—we will say disintegrated—permitting the—"

"Ollie was never more than five foot six or seven," interrupted Mr. Sikes impatiently. "In his stocking feet. Now, as I said before, if I was sure it is Ollie's corpus delicti they have got and if it could be proved to me that he was murdered by that boy setting over there in the corner, I would be one of the first men to head a mob to string him up to the limb of a tree."

He glared around the room as if challenging any one present—including Oliver—to question his right to do just what he said he would do—if!

But nobody paid any attention to him. They had heard him say it before.

"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 you have of releasing 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.

Lizzie Meggs appeared at the sitting-room door.

“That’s the third time the telephone has rung, Oliver,” she announced. “Hadn’t I better answer it?”

He shook his head. “No, Lizzie. Let ’em ring. It’s probably the newspapers—”

“You’d better let her answer, Oliver,” broke in Mrs. Grimes anxiously. “It may be some of your friends calling up to sympathize—”

“All my real friends are here, Aunt Serepta—except Sammy. We can’t be answering the telephone all night.”

“This last one sounded like long distance, Oliver,” said Lizzie.

“How does long distance sound, Lizzie?” he asked, with a smile. “Never mind. You needn’t answer. Let ’em ring. Orders is orders. I told you half an hour ago not to take that receiver off the hook.”

Mrs. Grimes followed the servant out of the room, closing the hall door after her.

“How many times, Lizzie Meggs, do I have to tell you not to call Mr. Baxter Oliver when there’s company here?” she said sharply.

“I can’t help it. He’d drop dead if I called him Mr. Baxter. We’ve called each other by our first names ever since we were kids in school together. Say, how would it sound if he was to begin calling me Miss Meggs? It’s the same thing, isn’t it? We went to high-school together and—”

“Now don’t be saucy, Lizzie. I admit it’s nicer to be democratic and all that but it’s not proper, and you know it. I don’t know what we’re coming to. That young fellow that comes up here to see you calls me Serepty and then he turns around and calls you Miss Meggs. I don’t see—”

“He has known me only a few weeks and he’s known you all his life,” retorted Lizzie stiffly.

The front door opened suddenly and in walked Sammy Parr. Both women uttered a startled exclamation.

"Excuse haste," he said, tossing his hat and gloves on a chair. "I'm back. Say, gee whiz, everybody in town is out on Clay Street, Aunt Serepty. Lots of them down this way, strolling past—"

"What are people saying, Sammy?" she broke in, grasping his arm.

"Well," he began, after a moment's hesitation, "there's a good deal of talk—but let's go in where the others are."

Lizzie Meggs followed them into the sitting-room, nervously twisting her hard and capable fingers.

"Much excitement downtown, Sammy?" inquired Oliver, arising.

"The streets are crowded. Not much excitement, however. Everybody seems to be sort of knocked silly."

"What are they saying?" demanded Judge Shortridge.

"Well, I hate to tell you, but as far as I can make out, Judge, there seems to be a general feeling that—that Oliver did it," said Sammy, wiping his moist forehead with the back of a hand that shook slightly.

"Snap judgment," said the lawyer, after silence had reigned for a few seconds. "That is always the way with the ignorant and uninformed. Nothing to worry about, Oliver. They will be on your side to-morrow when they understand the situation a little better. It's always the way with a crowd."

Josephine Sage spread her hands in a gesture of contempt. " 'What fools these mortals be,' " she declaimed theatrically.

"But we cannot ignore public opinion," cried Jane miserably. "It is hard to fight public opinion. Oh, Oliver, I am so—so worried."

"Don't you worry, Janie," he said softly, putting his arm about her. "Nothing will come of all this. We will sweep away every suspicion—"

"Public opinion changes over night," said Mr. Sage. "The light of understanding—"

"The public!" broke in his wife scornfully. "What is the public? I can tell you, my friends. It is the most fickle thing in all this world. No matter how long, how faithfully you serve the public, it turns upon you in time, like the adder, and stings you to death. It feeds you with praise, it fattens you with applause, it clothes you in garments of gold, and then it strips you clean and

leaves you to starve. It turns its back on you and fattens another favorite. You can't tell me anything about the blooming public. I know it to the core, and I am jolly well fed up with it."

"Bravo!" cried the Judge. "And let me add, Miss Judge, it's easy to put a ring through the public nose and lead it around in circles."

"Yes, but the thing is," broke in Mr. Link, "they're accusing Oliver of murder. If they make up their minds he's guilty—well, it'll take a lot of evidence to convince 'em he ain't."

"My dear man," said Mrs. Sage, "I was the defendant in the most celebrated murder trial ever known in London."

"Bless my soul, Josephine!" gasped her husband, startled.

"And I was sentenced to be hanged by the neck till dead," she finished in tragic tones.

"Mercy!" cried Mrs. Grimes weakly.

"My dear wife, have you gone stark, staring mad?"

"Not a bit of it. Would you like to know how I got out of it in the end? I was able to show that my beast of a husband committed the murder."

"Bless my soul!" again fell from the lips of the poor minister.

"The magistrate was such a bally ass. He brayed all through my best scene during an uninterrupted run of forty weeks—and there was nothing I could do about it. You see he was an actor-manager and there is nothing in heaven or on earth that can keep an actor-manager from hogging—"

"Thank God!" murmured Mr. Sage, mopping his brow. "It was in a play?"

"Certainly, my dear," said she patiently. "I wore this very dress in the trial scene."

It was after eleven o'clock when Oliver's friends departed. He stood on the porch and watched them drive off in the two automobiles. A few persons had stopped at the bottom of the drive to see who were in the cars. The flaring head-lights fell upon white, indistinct faces and then almost instantly left them in pitch darkness.

"I wish you had let Mr. Sage marry you and Jane to-night, Oliver," said Mrs. Grimes, at his side on the top step. "You have the license and

everything, and it could all have been over in a few minutes. And Jane begged you so hard."

"I couldn't do it, Aunt Serepta," he said dejectedly. "I don't know what is ahead of me. I may be in jail before I'm a day older." He gave her a wry, bitter smile as he put his arm over her shoulder and walked beside her into the house. "Pleasant thought, isn't it, old dear?—as the celebrated Miss Judge would say."

Clay Street was almost deserted as Lansing and Sammy Parr drove through it after leaving the Baxter place. The Sages were in the former's car. In front of the hotel Sammy, who was some distance ahead and who had dropped the two old men at Silas Link's home, slowed down and waited for Lansing to draw alongside.

"Say, Doc, it seems queer to me that there's practically nobody in the streets," he said. "An hour ago you couldn't have got through here without blowing the horn every ten feet. Women and children all over the place."

"It's after eleven, Sammy. I daresay the thrill has worn off and everybody's gone home to bed."

"Rumley is not an all night town," remarked Mrs. Sage from the back seat. "It used to go to bed *en masse* at nine o'clock. I daresay the movies keep them up later than prayer-meeting did in the old days."

"I don't mind saying to you all that there was a lot of ugly talk earlier in the evening," said Sammy uneasily. "A lot of nasty talk. I didn't tell Oliver, but I heard more than one man say he ought to be strung up."

"Oh, Sammy, do you think—" began Jane, in a sudden agony of alarm.

"Nonsense!" cried the minister, instantly sensing her fear. "Such things don't happen in these days and in this part of the country. The people will let the law take its course. Have no fear on that score."

"Well, anyhow, it looks mighty queer to me," said Sammy, tactlessly shaking his head. "I don't like this awful stillness. It isn't like this even on ordinary nights."

Jane clutched Lansing's arm and shook it violently.

"Doctor Lansing," she cried, "we must return to Oliver's house immediately. He will have to come over to our house—Better still, Sammy, you must drive him up to the city. To-night. At once. I am frightened. Something terrible is afoot. I know it. I feel it. It is so still. Look! Why aren't the street lamps in Maple Avenue lighted? It is as dark as—"

“By jingo, Lansing!” exclaimed Sammy, starting up from his seat to peer over the windshield. “See that? Men running across Maple Avenue. ’Way up yonder where that arc light is at Fiddler Street. Three or four men. Didn’t you see them?”

“We must beat it back to Oliver’s,” half shouted Lansing, excitedly.

“Take the women home first,” ordered Sammy, “and then come back. I’ll go on ahead.”

“Wait!” commanded Mr. Sage. “Drive on up Maple, Sammy. Follow those men. See what they are up to. They are headed for the swamp road. Lansing and I will follow you in a jiffy. Drive like the devil!” he shouted in ringing tones.

“No, no, no!” screamed Jane. “The other way! To Oliver’s! I will not go home. I am going to him! Turn around—turn around! Do you hear me?”

“Where in God’s name are the police?” cried Josephine.

“We can’t take you back there,” cried Lansing. “Hell may be to pay. It’s no place for women, Jane. Sit still! I’ll have you home in two minutes.”

“I will jump out! I swear to heaven I will,” she cried shrilly.

“Turn back!” commanded Jane’s mother. “I am not afraid of them. Jane is not afraid. We cannot desert Oliver if he is in danger. Please God he may not be. Turn back, I say!”

“Yes!” cried the minister. “We must go to Oliver—all of us!”

The two cars made reckless turns in the narrow street and were off like the wind.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HANGING

The mob, grim, silent and determined, advanced upon the house from the upper reaches of the swamp, a swaying, unwieldy mass that surged up the slope and thinned into a compact, snake-like column in the narrow road. Since ten o'clock men by twos and threes and fours had been making their way through back streets and lanes to an appointed spot an eighth of a mile east of the Baxter home, the tree-bordered swale that marked the extreme northern end of the slough. There were no lights, and none spoke save in cautious whispers, nor was there one in all the grim three hundred who did not tremble under the strain of suppressed excitement—as the dog trembles when he is held in leash with the scent of the quarry in his quivering nostrils.

Scouts, creeping up to the house, had witnessed the departure of Oliver's guests. Like swift, scarcely visible shadows they sped back through the darkness of the swamp road with their report. Whispers swelled into hoarse, guttural mutterings as the mob, headed by its set-faced, scowling leaders, left the swale and started on its deadly march. Followed the shuffle of a multitude of feet through dry grass and over the loose surface of the dirt road; the harsh breathing of hundreds of throats through tense nostrils or open, sag-lipped mouths; the swish and rustle of dead leaves; in all, the hushed thunder of men in motion.

The leaders—two men from the hardware store of Oliver Baxter!—strode out in front, crowded close by the swift-moving horde that from time to time almost overran them in its eagerness to have the dirty business over with. There were guns and axes and sledge-hammers in the hands of men at the head of the column.

Sight of the lighted upstairs windows threw the mob into a frenzy. They had come to kill and their prey was up there behind a thin barricade of glass and parchment-colored linen! And they were near three hundred strong! A few scattered ill-timed shouts, were checked by a mighty, sibilant hiss that swept through the crowd; those who had ignored strict orders fell back into pinched silence.

Quickly the house was surrounded. No avenue of escape was left unguarded. A small, detached group advanced toward the porch, above the

roof of which were lights in the windows of what every one knew to be young Oliver Baxter's bedroom.

A loud voice called out:

"Oliver Baxter!"

The hush of death settled upon the crowd. Even the breathing seemed to have ceased.

A window shade flew up in one of the windows and the figure of a man stood fully revealed. He stooped, his face close to the pane as he peered intently out into the blackness below. Shading his eyes with one hand, he continued his search of the night. He was without coat or vest; his white shirt was open at the throat.

A man in the crowd below took a fresh grip on the rope he carried in his hand.

Again the loud, firm voice:

"Come out! We want to see you, Oliver Baxter."

Oliver raised the window and leaned out. "Who is it? What do you want?" he demanded.

"We are your father's friends," came the reply. "That's all you need to know. Come out!"

"What have you got down there? A mob? I'll see you in hell before I'll come out! If you're after me, you'll have to come and get me. But I warn you! I've got a gun up here and, so help me God, I'll shoot to kill. I'm not afraid of you. Wait till to-morrow, men. You will be glad if you do. It is not my father's body they found. It will be proved to you. Go home, for God's sake, and don't attempt to do this thing you are—"

A deep growl rose from a hundred throats, stilled almost instantly as the clear voice of the leader rang out again.

"We will give you one minute to come out. If you are not out here on the porch by that time we'll smash your damned doors in and we'll drag you out."

Oliver glanced over his shoulder. Mrs. Grimes and Lizzie, with blanched faces, had come to his bedroom door.

"Telephone for the police, Lizzie," he cried out sharply. "No! Wait! Get out of the house yourselves. Don't think of me. You mustn't be here if that

mob breaks in and—”

He did not finish the sentence. In the middle of it he uttered a shout of alarm and sprang toward the bureau on the opposite side of the room. There was a rush of footsteps in the hall, then the two women were flung aside and into the room leaped three, four, half a dozen men. As Lizzie fell back against the wall, she shrieked:

“The back door! I forgot to—”

Oliver knocked the first man sprawling, but the others were upon him like an avalanche.... As they led him, now unresisting, from the room his wild, beaten gaze fell upon the huddled form of Serepta Grimes lying inert in the hall.

“For God’s sake, be decent enough to look after her,” he panted. “Don’t leave her lying—”

The crash of splintering blows upon the outer door, the jangle of shattered glass, the suddenly released howls of human hounds—pandemonium so devilish that Oliver’s fearless heart quailed and he began to cry for mercy.

“Don’t kill me like this! Don’t! Don’t! Give me a chance! Let me speak! Oh, my God!” Then rage succeeded terror. “Let go of me, you dirty dogs! Let go of me, Charlie! Steve! God damn your souls to hell—give me a chance!”

They dragged him down the stairs. The front door gave way as they neared the bottom and over the wreckage stumbled men with sledges, grunting, snarling men whose teeth showed between stretched, drawn lips, and who stopped short at sight of those descending.

“We’ve got him,” shouted one of his captors. “Make way! Let us through!”

There was no light in the hall, only that from the open bedroom door above. Some one below flashed an electric torch on the face of the captive. It was ghastly white.

“It’s him, all right,” cried several voices. “Open up! We’ve got him! Make way out there!”

Out of the house and down into the yard they hurried him. There they paused long enough to tie his hands securely behind his back. An awed silence had fallen upon the crowd—the shouts ceased, curses died on men’s lips. They had him! Tragedy was at hand. More than one heart quaked in the

presence of it, and more than one stomach turned in revolt. It was grim business that lay ahead of them and they were good citizens!

"No lights!" shouted a loud-voiced man. "Come on! Hustle up! Let's get it over with."

Oliver strained at his bonds. His chest heaved, his throat swelled.

"In Christ's name, men—what are you going to do with me?" he cried out in a strange, piercing voice.

"Shut up!"

"You are making a horrible mistake," cried the captive, as he stumbled along between the men who held his arms. "You are committing the most horrible—"

Something fell upon his head, scraped down over his face. He stifled a scream. He felt the slack noose tighten about his bare throat.

"Damn you all to hell," he raged, sinking his heels in the earth and holding back with all his might. "You beasts! You damned fools! Let go of me! Let me speak! Isn't there a sensible man among you? Are you all—"

He was shoved forward, protesting shrilly, impatiently.

They had picked the spot: the place where father and son parted on that distant night. And the tree: the sturdy old oak whose limbs overhung the road. They had picked the limb.

There was no delay.... The stout rope was thrown over the limb, the noose was drawn close about his neck by cold, nervous fingers.... A prayer was strangled on his writhing lips. Strong hands hauled at the rope. He swung in the air....

A great white flare of light burst upon the grewsome spectacle—the roar of a charging monster—the din of shrieking klaxons—and then the piercing scream of a woman.

The dense mob in the road broke, fighting frantically to get out of the path of Lansing's car. Some were struck and hurled screaming aside—and on came the car, forging its way slowly but relentlessly through the struggling mass.

A man standing up in the tonneau was crying in a stentorian, far-reaching voice:

“Fools! Accursed fools! Ye know not what ye do! Stop this hideous outrage! God forgive you if we are too late! God forgive—”

Again the woman’s scream.

“He is hanging! Hanging! Oh, God!”

Up to the swaying, wriggling form shot the car, a force irresistible guided by a man who thought not of the human beings he might crush to death in his desire to reach the one he sought to save.

“Let go of that rope!” yelled this man.

Behind him came another car. Panic seized the mob. The compact mass broke and scattered. Like sheep, men plunged down the slope—now a frightened, safety-seeking horde of cowards.

A writhing, tortured figure lay in the middle of the road, a loose rope swinging free from the limb. The bewildered, startled men who had held it in their hands fell back—uncertain, bewildered.

Lansing, unafraid, sprang from the car and rushed to the prostrate form. In a second he was tugging at the noose, cursing frightfully. No one opposed him. The mob seemed suddenly to have become paralyzed, afflicted by the stupor of indecision. Many were already fleeing madly from the scene—down the road, across the slough—yellow-hearted deserters whose only thought was to escape the consequences of recognition. A few score, falling back a little in stubborn disorder, stood glowering and blinking outside the shafts of light. Men with guns and pistols and axes they were, but cowed by the swift realization that they dared not use them.

The tall, gaunt figure in the tonneau was praying, his hands uplifted. By his side stood a woman.

Now a woman flung herself down beside the man with the rope around his neck, sobbing, moaning, her arms straining to lift his shoulders from the ground.

A baffled roar went up from the mob. Men surged forward and hands were laid upon the rope—too late. The noose was off—and Sammy Parr standing over the doctor and the distracted girl, had a revolver in his hand.

“Come on!” he yelled. “Come on, you dirty cowards! You swine! You damned Huns! Come on and get a man-sized pill!”

From all sides boomed the shouts and curses of a quickly revived purpose.

“Rush ’em!”

“Kill the—”

“Beat their heads off!”

“Get him! Get him!”

“String him up!”

Suddenly a strange voice rose above the clamor. A voice that seemed to come from nowhere and yet was everywhere—the like of which no man there had ever heard before. Rich, full, vibrant, it fell upon puzzled ears and once again there was pause. The keyless chorus of execrations ceased abruptly, as if a mighty hand were clapped upon a hundred mouths.

All eyes were upon the owner of this wondrous, clarion voice. A startling figure she was, standing erect upon the front seat of Lansing’s car. Magically tall and mysterious as she towered above and out of the path of light thrown by the car behind.

“Men of Rumley! Hold! Hold, I command you! Is there one among you who has not heard of the gypsy’s prophecy of thirty years ago? Let him speak who will, and let him speak for all.”

A score of voices answered.

“Aye!” she went on. “You all have heard it. It is as familiar to you, old and young, as the story of the Crucifixion. There are old men among you. Men who were here when that truthful prophecy was uttered thirty years ago. You old men heard of the gypsy’s prophecy within twenty-four hours after it was spoken in the house you have ravished to-night. You heard it word for word, faithfully repeated by men and women who were present and who have never forgotten what she said. I ask one of you—any one of you—to stand forth and tell the rest of this craven mob what the gypsy fortune-teller said on that wild and stormy night.”

Two or three men stepped forward as if fascinated.

“She said the baby son of Oliver Baxter would be hung for murder before he was thirty years old,” bawled one of them.

“He killed his father. He ought to be hung. The gypsy was right,” shouted another.

“And what else did she say?” rang out the voice of Josephine Judge.

“Oh, a lot of things that don’t matter now,” yelled a man back in the crowd. “Get busy, boys. We can’t—”

“Stop! Wait, and I will tell you what she said. She said one thing that all of you old men ought to remember. It was the most important thing of all, the most horrible. I was there. This man of God, my husband, was there. Other honest people, friends of yours, were there. They heard her words and they repeated them to you the next day. Silence! Listen to me, varlets! You believe she spoke the truth when she uttered that prophecy? Answer!”

“Yes!” came from a hundred throats.

“Then, in God’s name, WHY ARE YOU MURDERING OLIVER OCTOBER BAXTER?”

“We gave him a fair trial,” answered one of the leaders. “We know all the facts. He is guilty of killing his father. We don’t need any more proof—”

“Are you one of the men who heard the story thirty years ago?”

“Yes, I am—and I heard it straight.”

“Then you must know that this poor boy was adjudged innocent of this crime on the day he was born,” fell slowly, distinctly from the lips of Josephine. “I will repeat the words of the gypsy woman. She said: ‘He will not commit a murder. He will be hanged for a crime he did not commit.’ Speak! Are not those the words of the gypsy?”

Absolute silence ensued. It was as if the crowd had turned to stone.

“And so,” she cried, leveling her finger at the men in the front rank, “you have done your part toward making the prophecy come true. You have hung Oliver October Baxter in spite of the fact that you were told thirty years ago that he would be innocent. It has all come out as the fortune-teller said it would. She read his future in the stars. She read it all from his own star—and, look ye, fools of Rumley, in yonder black dome a single star is shining. See! With your own blind eyes—see!”

She lifted a hand and pointed majestically. Every eye followed the direction indicated by that dramatic forefinger. A star gleamed brightly in the southern sky, a single star in a desert of black.

“That is the star of Oliver October Baxter. He was born under that star and, God help us all, I fear he has died beneath it. Out of all the great and endless firmament, that one star reveals itself to-night. Slink home, assassins! Murderers all! May the curse of that shining star fall upon ye—now, henceforth and forever! May ye never escape from the light of that

great accusing eye, looking down upon you from Heaven! Slink home to your wives and children and tell them what ye have done this night!"

But the mob stood rooted to the ground. A sudden shout went up from those in the front rank—a strange shout of relief.

Oliver October was struggling to his feet, assisted by Jane and Lansing. His arms, released from their bonds, were thrown across their shoulders, his chin was high, he was coughing violently.

"He's all right!" yelled a man, and started eagerly forward only to fall back as Jane Sage held up her hand and screamed:

"Keep away! You will have to kill me before you can touch him again, you beasts!"

"Aw, I only want to help get him into the car—"

"Stand back!" commanded Lansing. "We don't need your help."

Three or four eager voices cried out shakily and in unison:

"Take him to a doctor's!"

Then a tenser silence than before fell over the scene, for Jane was crying:

"Are you all right, Oliver? Can you speak? What is it, dearest? What are you trying to say?"

"Don't try to speak yet, Baxter," cautioned Lansing. "Plenty of time. You're all right. You'll be yourself in a few minutes. Thank God, we got here when we did."

"Keep quiet!" ordered a voice in the mob. "He wants to say something. He's alive, and he wants to say something. Sh!"

"Drop that rope!" roared Sammy as one of the crowd left the circle and hastily reached for the rope. The fellow leaped back as if stung.

"I was only meanin' to take it back to Ollie's store," he whined. "It belongs to him."

"Take him to a doctor's!" roared a dozen anxious men.

"Clear the road!" roared others.

"Slink back into the foul fastnesses of yon accursed swamp," rang out the voice of the great Josephine Judge. They got Oliver into the forward car,

where he huddled down between Jane and her mother. They heard him whisper hoarsely, jerkily:

"Never mind about me—I'm—all right. They won't try—it again. Look after Aunt—Serepta first. She's hurt. They left her—lying up—"

"Don't worry, old top," cried Sammy eagerly. "I'll go back and look out for her. You go along with Doc. He'll fix you up. All you need is a good stiff —"

"Clear the road!" roared a score of voices as Lansing's car moved slowly forward, and off the sides, down the slope and up the bank, slunk the obedient lynchers. Down through the lane of men who carefully shielded their faces from the glare of the head-lights, Lansing's car advanced. It picked up speed and soon the little red tail-light was lost to sight. Having watched it until it disappeared, the mob, as one man, turned its anxious eyes heavenward—not in supplication but for a somewhat surreptitious look at Oliver's shining star. They stared open-mouthed. A miracle had happened. The sky was full of merry, twinkling little stars—and more, like fairies, came out to play and dance even as the watchers below gazed up in wonder.

Two men slouched side-by-side behind all the others as the once bloodthirsty horde bore off swiftly, apprehensively, but still dubiously through the night which now seemed to mock them with its silence. One of these men said to the other:

"I've worked in that store for twenty-two years. Where the dickens do you suppose I'll find another job at my age?"

"You won't need one," said the other gloomily, "if my prophecy comes true."

"Your prophecy? What are you talking about?"

"I prophesy we'll all be in jail for this night's work."

A long silence. "Well," said the other, "old man Sikes and Silas Link can rest in peace from now on. He's been hung."

"Yep. He's out of all his troubles and ours are just beginning. I guess it must have been a lucky star he was born under."

An hour later Sammy Parr expressed himself somewhat irrelevantly in the parsonage sitting-room.

"Say, Miss Judge, you were great. I never heard anything like that speech of yours. And your voice—why, it gave me the queerest kind of

shivers."

Josephine was pacing the floor, her fine brow knitted in thought. She was muttering to herself. Oliver, lying on a couch, smiled up into Jane's lovely eyes. She sat beside him, holding his hand in both of hers. Serepta Grimes, having stubbornly refused to go to bed, sat in a morris chair across the room and, perhaps for the first time in her long life, was being forced to accept her own medicine at the hands of a suddenly important Samaritan in the person of Lizzie Meggs, who, without rime or reason, had been plying her with aromatic spirits of ammonia for the better part of an hour, reserving to herself the diminishing contents of a silver hip-flask produced by the efficient Mr. Parr. The Reverend Mr. Sage stood apart with Dr. Lansing, deep in a low-voiced argument as to whether God or man, Providence or science, had saved the life of Oliver October. In the crook of the parson's arm snuggled Henry the Eighth, who, between intermittent fits of dozing, licked the hand that had spanked devotion into him.

Miss Judge paused.

"It was rather good, wasn't it?" she observed. "I am trying to fix that speech in my mind. I shall have a play written around it. I know the very man who can do it. He has been eager to write a play for me. I shall telegraph him to-morrow to come to Rumley at once. In my mind's eye I can visualize that remarkable scene, I can—"

"Josephine!" cried Mr. Sage, aghast. "You are not thinking of going back—going back—"

She held up her hand. "Not to London, old thing—not to London. It is possible I may consent to make a farewell tour of America. Sarah Bernhardt, Ellen Terry—why not I? My own company—"

At this juncture, Oliver sat up and claimed the audience.

"Sammy," he cried out thickly but with the ring of enthusiasm in his voice, "do me a favor, will you?"

"Sure," cried Sammy, springing to his feet.

"Stand up with me. I'm going to be married. I've been best man for you twice—"

"Great!" cried Sammy. "I'll not only stand up with you, old boy, but I'll let you lean on me."

"Now?" gasped Serepta Grimes, in great agitation.

“At once,” declared Oliver, struggling to his feet. “I came near to losing her to-night. I’ll take no more chances.”

“Yes—now!” cried Jane softly, and for the first time that night the color came back to her cheeks.

CHAPTER XXV

MR. GOOCH SEES THINGS AT NIGHT

Horace Gooch was going to bed. He had had a hard day, and it was nine o'clock. He had a notion he was not likely to sleep very well. The sheriff of the county had telephoned earlier in the evening—in fact, he was at supper—that a body had been found in one of the marsh pools. The news rather took his appetite away. He had a weak and treacherous stomach to begin with, and the mere thought of going over to Rumley in the morning to see if he could identify the grewsome object caused him to suddenly realize that he had a much weaker stomach than he had ever suspected before. He had, besides, an absurd notion that he was going to be haunted all night long by the ghastly remains of his brother-in-law.

While he always had contended that Oliver Baxter did not have much of a head to speak of, the fact that it had been split wide open with an ax or something of the sort was very likely to cause him to see things even with his eyes closed and the bedroom in pitch darkness. He decided to leave the light burning in his room, and then, after further deliberation, concluded, that as long as it had to be lit anyway it would be a very sensible thing on his part if he were to put in the time reading instead of wasting electricity.

Mr. Gooch slept in a night-shirt. He didn't believe in new-fangled things. He was a plain man. No frills for him.

The windows of his bedroom looked out on to an extensive lawn, formerly a rather pretentious and well-kept half-acre but now unkempt, weedy and in a state of dire neglect. Mr. Gooch had cunningly allowed his yard to fall into a sort of groveling, imploring decrepitude, indicative of poverty rather than parsimony. He wanted the voters to understand that he was by no means as rich as the unprincipled opposition said he was. He regarded it as a very telling piece of political strategy.

Before retiring to the large four-poster bed—which, now that he was a widower, seemed needlessly commodious and would have been disposed of long ago but for a thrifty far-sightedness that took into consideration the possibility that he might get married again—before retiring, he peeped out between the window curtains to see whether the arc light was burning at the street corner above. It was, and he experienced a singular sensation of relief. Then he put on his spectacles and got into bed. He had a book, a well-worn

copy of "David Harum," but he did not begin reading at once. He was thinking of the many dark and lonely nights old Oliver Baxter had spent in Death Swamp. It gave him a creepy feeling. He tucked the covers a little more tightly under his chin—but still the creepy feeling persisted.

Just as he was beginning to wish that they had not found his unfortunate brother-in-law, a pleasant and agreeable alternative presented itself and he noticed an immediate increase of warmth in his veins. Strange that he had not thought of it sooner. It was most consoling, after all, this finding of the corpus delicti. If they hadn't found it he would have been obliged to pay all costs arising from the search and investigation. He had agreed to do so. But now that the "body of the crime" had been unearthed he would be relieved of this onerous obligation. The county would have to pay for everything. That was understood. He smiled a little, turned the covers down from his chin, and took up his book.

"Hey, Horace!"

He lay perfectly still for a few seconds, his eyes glued to the page. An icy chill, starting in his abdomen, spread all over him, slowly at first, then with consuming swiftness. He bit hard on his teeth to keep them from chattering. The voice sounded as if it were just outside his chamber window. He waited.

"Hey, Horace!"

A deep groan issued through Mr. Gooch's stiffening lips. He shrank down into the bed and pulled the covers up over his head. He was haunted! There was no other voice in the world like it. He would know it among a million. Oliver Baxter had come to haunt him! He had a horrifying mental vision of the unforgettable figure of his brother-in-law floating in the air just outside—this changed instantly to an even more appalling spectacle: old Oliver emerging from his grave in the swamp and speeding through the black night to pay him a visit—with his skull split wide open—

Some one was knocking at the front door. Even through the thick bed-covers he could hear the sharp tapping—not the tapping of flesh-covered knuckles but of bare bones!

Mr. Gooch's grizzled head popped out from beneath the covers. He remembered that his bedroom door was unlocked. Anybody—any*thing* could walk right in—He climbed out of bed with a spryness that would have amazed him if he had been able to devote the slightest thought to it.

Again the voice, but this time reassuringly remote from his window-sill. He stopped irresolute half way to the door. If he waited long enough, he reasoned, the ghost would go away thinking he was not at home. There was not the slightest doubt that it was farther away now than when it spoke the first time. Besides there was something more or less human in this last cry from the night. It wasn't at all spookish. It seemed to express wrath.

"All right! You can go to Jericho."

Mr. Gooch went to the window. He was still shivering and he had a queer, unpleasant notion that his hair was wilting—a most astonishing sensation. He hesitated a moment, then boldly drew the curtains apart. The light from the arc light at the corner, fairly well-spent after traversing a couple of hundred feet, was of sufficient strength to flood the lawn with a dim radiance. A shadowy object half way down to the gate resolved itself into the figure of a man as Mr. Gooch gazed upon it with bewildered, incredulous eyes.

"Hello, Horace," came wafting up to Mr. Gooch—apparently from this shadowy object. "That you? Say, open up and let me in."

Mr. Gooch grasped the window frame for support.

"Good God!" he gulped, but in a voice so strange and hollow that he did not recognize it as his own. In a sudden panic he threw up the window and screeched—in an entirely different voice but equally as unrecognizable:

"Go away! Leave me alone!"

"Say, don't you know who it is? It's me."

The figure drew nearer the house. At the same time Mr. Gooch stuck his head out of the window and bawled:

"Help! For God's sake, somebody come and chase it away! Help!"

"What's the matter with you, you darned old fool!" barked the indistinct visitor. "You'll wake the dead, yelling like that."

"Wake the dead!" repeated Mr. Gooch in a low, sepulchral voice.

"I'm Ollie Baxter. For goodness' sake, Horace, don't tell me you've forgotten your only brother-in-law. I—"

"Go away! You're dead. I don't want any dead people coming around here to—"

A shrill, lively cackle came up from the murk. Mr. Gooch clapped his hand to his forehead.

"Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord!" he groaned.

"Ain't you going to let me in? I'm not going to ask you again, you darned old skinflint. I hate you anyhow, and always did—but I thought maybe after me being away for more than a year you'd be hospitable enough to—"

"Stop talking!" commanded Mr. Gooch. "You always did talk too much. Now, listen to me. Are you really alive?"

"Course I am. What ails you?"

"I don't believe it. They found your body this afternoon."

"You don't say so!" gasped the object under the window.

"Horribly decayed," added Mr. Gooch sternly.

"Well, I'll be danged!"

"So you simply *can't* be alive. Go away!"

"This is mighty queer. Are they positive it's me?"

"Hey?"

"I mean are they sure it's my body?"

"There's no evidence to the contrary. Seems to be absolutely no doubt about it."

"Well, well! Where did they find me?"

"You know as well as I do."

"I don't know anything of the kind. It's news to me, Horace."

"See here, Oliver, what's the sense of lying to me? You know you're dead and—"

"Well, suppose I am," broke in the other irascibly; "that's no reason why you should stick your head out of a window and tell the whole town of Hopkinsville about it. You come down here and let me in. I'll derned soon show you I'm not dead. What's more, I never have been dead. So they couldn't have found my body."

Mr. Gooch was now convinced. It was Oliver Baxter and he was very much alive.

"Well, what do you want?"

"I want to come in and spend the night with you, that's what I want."

"There's a good hotel up on Jackson Street," began Mr. Gooch, but curiosity getting the better of him he abruptly called out for Oliver to wait till he had put on his pants and he would come down and let him in.

As he hurriedly started to slip on his trousers he heard his brother-in-law whistling a strange and jaunty melody out in the yard. He never had heard anything like it before.

A sudden, desolating thought struck him as he sat on the edge of the bed. His trousers were but half on when the shock came. He knew not how long he sat there, powerless and inactive, staring at nothing. A shout from outside aroused him. He groaned and then slipped the other leg into his trousers.

Calamity! His cake was dough! The return of Oliver Baxter meant his political doom. Young Oliver, vindicated, would be carried into office by an unprecedented majority, riding serene and triumphant on a wave of popularity that would sweep all opposition before it. Somewhere back in his mind lurked a very distasteful phrase that ended with "cocked hat," although he could not quite remember the rest of it. He could and did remember young Oliver's campaign boast, for it was very recent and distinct and unnecessarily public. "Skin him alive" was the heathenish slogan.

As he descended the stairs he tried to think of some means to avert the calamity. He thought of locking his brother-in-law in the cellar and keeping him there until after election day. He wondered if he could persuade the old man—for a substantial cash consideration—to remain in seclusion or wander off again or—But, no; he had sunk too much money already, and there was still an additional thousand or two to be paid out for the search and—

He stopped suddenly, reeling as from a blow. The lighted candle, held almost directly in front of his face, witnessed a most astonishing transformation. Mr. Gooch's harassed visage slowly lighted up; it became almost radiant. He hurried to the door and unbolted it quickly, for he was now afraid that old Oliver might have taken it into his head to disappear again!

He had just remembered Oliver October's promise to pay him five thousand dollars in cash if he produced his father, dead or alive! He was actually smirking as he pressed the electric light button. The wind blew the candle out as he threw the door open.

“Come right in, Oliver,” he cried, quite heartily but still with a trace of apprehension. He had not recovered from his scare and half-expected Mr. Baxter to float past him into the hall.

A bent, disreputable-looking figure shuffled in, thumping his cane on the floor.

“Well, well!” exclaimed Mr. Gooch, holding the doorknob in one hand and the candle-stick in the other—making it obviously impossible for him to shake hands with what might after all turn out to be a cadaver. “You—you certainly gave me quite a scare.”

He peered narrowly, intently at the weather-beaten face of his wife’s brother. Old Oliver was looking around the hall as if inspecting a most unfamiliar place. Mr. Gooch, closing the door, risked a timid slap on the other’s shoulder, and was greatly relieved to find that it was solid. Mr. Baxter did not take kindly to this demonstration. He winced.

“Say, don’t do that,” he said. “I’ve got rheumatism in that shoulder. Comes from sleeping out in the open air a good bit of the time this fall.”

Mr. Gooch stepped back, the better to survey his brother-in-law’s person. There was every indication that Mr. Baxter had taken the precaution to sleep in his clothes pretty steadily all fall. They were wrinkled and dusty and hung limply, crookedly on his graceless frame. The coat collar was turned up and held tight to his throat by a thick red muffler. He wore a sad-looking green Homberg hat with a perky red feather sticking up from the band.

“Take off your muffler,” said Horace, desiring indisputable evidence.

“Oh, it’s there all right,” divined Mr. Baxter. “You can feel it if you don’t believe me. It’s just as well you didn’t offer to shake hands with me, Horace. I swore I’d never shake hands with you.”

“Come out to the kitchen,” said Gooch, scowling. “It’s warm there, and besides you might like a cup of hot coffee.”

“All I want is a bed to sleep in. I haven’t slept in a regular bed for the Lord knows how long. Thank God, I’ll be sleeping in my own to-morrow night.”

He followed the puzzled Mr. Gooch to the kitchen and at once drew a chair up to the stove.

“Where have you been all this time?” murmured Horace, generously replenishing the fire.

“Oh—traveling,” said Mr. Baxter casually. He removed his hat and placed it on the floor beside the chair.

Mr. Gooch leaned over and scrutinized the top of his guest’s head. Then he deliberately felt of it.

“What are you doing?” demanded Mr. Baxter sharply.

“Oh—I was just wondering if—But never mind. Now, Ollie, tell me all about yourself. We’ve been hunting for you all over the—”

Oliver’s cackle interrupted him.

“Like chasing a flea, wasn’t it?” he chuckled. “Before we go any farther,” he went on seriously, “tell me about my boy Oliver. How is he? Hasn’t been hung yet, has he?”

“Not yet,” said Mr. Gooch sententiously. He placed a chair on the opposite side of the stove and sat down.

“Well, he’s in no danger now,” said Mr. Baxter. “And what’s more, he never was in any danger of being hung. That gypsy woman lied.”

“That’s what I said at the time. Didn’t I tell you what a darned fool you were?”

“How’s my boy, and where is he? I telephoned him three times to-night but the doggoned system’s always out of order. Couldn’t get any answer.”

“He’s over in Rumley,” said Mr. Gooch shortly. “I guess he’s all right. Leastwise he was up to this evening.”

“That’s good. By glory, I’ll be glad to see him. I’ve got some great news for him. Took me over a year to get it and cost me a lot of money, but it was worth it. My mind is at rest. Say, do you know I’ve been from one end of this country to the other? On the go every minute of the time. It wasn’t till about a month ago that I run across the right band.”

“Band?”

“Yep. Band. Struck ’em over in eastern Ohio. I guess I must have tracked down seventy-five or a hundred bands before I got the right one.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Gypsies,” said Mr. Baxter briefly, holding his gnarled red hands out to the fire. “You said something about coffee, Horace.”

Mr. Gooch eyed him fearfully for a few moments.

“Crazy as a loon,” he muttered.

“Who? Me?”

“No, no!” cried Mr. Gooch hastily. “Don’t get excited now, Ollie. Keep calm. I’ll put the coffee pot on right away. Just you keep quiet—”

“Is that what you were feeling my head for?” demanded Mr. Baxter shrewdly.

“Not at all, not at all, just—affection, Ollie.”

“Umph! Well, I’m not crazy—not on your life. Hurry up with that coffee. Mind if I light my pipe?”

“Certainly not. Go ahead,” urged Mr. Gooch, whose antipathy to tobacco was so pronounced that no one ever thought of smoking in his house.

Mr. Baxter stretched out his wrinkled legs, and filled his pipe and lit it, all the while keeping his keen little eyes on his brother-in-law. Mr. Gooch splashed considerable water upon the hot stove as he filled the coffee pot. The visitor seemed to find pleasure in exhaling great clouds of rank-smelling smoke.

“Yes, sir,” he began presently; “I hunted this country over before I found her. She remembered everything. She even remembered you, Horace.” He cackled. “I’d hate to tell you what she said about you.”

Mr. Gooch was silent.

“It took me nearly two weeks to get her to admit that she lied,” went on Mr. Baxter. “And I guess she wouldn’t have done it then if I hadn’t offered her a hundred dollars to tell the truth. You see, Horace, it was this way. As my boy Oliver grew up to be a man I realized that she had lied dreadfully about one thing, so that set me to thinking that she must have lied about others. She said he would grow up to be the living image of his father. Well, he didn’t. He’s a hundred per cent better looking than I am or ever was. That’s a fact, ain’t it?”

“Are you talking about the gypsy who told his fortune?” inquired Mr. Gooch, comprehending at last.

“Yes. Queen Marguerite. Mrs. Tobias Spink in private. One of the most interesting queens I’ve ever met, and, by gosh, I’ve met a lot of ’em in my travels. As I was saying, I got it into my head that if she could be wrong about Oliver looking like me she could have been wrong about everything else. So I made up my mind to find her and—”

"So *that's* what you've been up to, you blamed old idiot!" exclaimed Mr. Gooch. "Sneaking away and leaving everybody to wonder what had become of you. You ought to be cow-hided, Oliver Baxter. All the trouble and anxiety and worry you've caused me and your son and everybody else! All the money your son spent looking for you—to say nothing of what I've spent myself lately. Why, you old—"

"Keep your shirt on, Horace," advised Oliver blandly. "Don't get excited. I just had to do it. I couldn't stand it any longer. I would have lost my mind long before Oliver was thirty if I had sat around waiting for a year and more to see if he was really going to be hung. Besides, it's none of your business anyhow. You say Oliver spent a lot of money trying to find me?" He put the question eagerly, wistfully.

"And so did I," snapped Mr. Gooch. "I'm not saying Oliver spent his own money. He probably—"

"I don't care whose money he spent," cried Mr. Baxter joyously. "I'll pay back all that you spent, so don't you worry, you derned old skinflint. Every nickel of it."

"You will?" cried Mr. Gooch. "Is that a promise?"

"Certainly. And my word is as good as my bond," said Mr. Baxter proudly.

"I've always said you were an absolutely honest man, Oliver," said Mr. Gooch ingratiatingly. "Never knew you to go back on your word. If you say you'll pay, I know you will."

"Figure it up and let me know," said Mr. Baxter. "I guess my business is still prospering. I had a kind of notion Oliver October would step in and take hold of it in my place after I went away, so—But never mind about that. Yes, sir, I finally got the queen to confess that *everything* she said that night was false. She wanted two hundred, but I wouldn't give it. Said she was ruining herself by confessing, and all that. Oliver ain't going to be hung any more than you or I. All spite work, she says. Got mad at all of us. He's not even going to be a general in the army, or a great and successful business man, or enter the halls of state, or—"

"What's that?" demanded Mr. Gooch quickly, hopefully.

"—or look exactly like me," concluded Mr. Baxter. "She's going to make an affidavit to it soon as we get to Rumley to-morrow."

Mr. Gooch started, casting an anxious look toward the kitchen door.

“Say, you—you don’t mean to tell me you’ve got her with you,” he rasped. “If that’s so, I want to tell you right now, Ollie Baxter, I won’t have you bringing any strange women into my house. My house is a respectable —”

“She’s out at the camp,” interrupted Mr. Baxter. “We’ve camped just south of town. I’ve been sleeping with her father for nearly a month—on rainy nights, I mean, when we had to get into the caravan. His name is Wattles. Eighty years old and still the best horsetrader in the tribe.”

Mr. Gooch groaned.

“I’ll fix up the sofa in the parlor for you to sleep on, Ollie,” he said after a long and thoughtful pause. “The bed in the spare room isn’t made up. In fact, it’s down altogether—being repaired,” he went on lamely.

“You’ve got a double bed in your room, haven’t you?” said Mr. Baxter.

“Well, it’s boiling at last,” evaded Mr. Gooch. “Now, we’ll have some nice hot coffee. Like it pretty strong?”

“Middling,” said Mr. Baxter reproachfully. “I was counting on sleeping in a nice, warm, soft bed to-night, Horace.”

His host pondered. “I was just thinking that maybe I could bring down a mattress from the attic, Ollie, and fix you up in the hall just outside my bedroom door. I’ll leave the door open. Plenty of blankets and—”

“All right, all right,” broke in Mr. Baxter, and gulped down some of the hot coffee. “I want to get an early start to-morrow morning, so you don’t need to mind about giving me a breakfast. We figure on getting away a little after sunrise.”

His host remonstrated. “I won’t listen to it,” he said. “You will go over to Rumley with me in my car just as soon as we’ve had breakfast. Your friends —I mean the gypsies—can follow along later. Not another word, old boy. I insist on it. You will want to see your son as soon as possible. I have to go to Rumley in the morning anyway.” He hesitated a moment, eyeing his guest keenly, and then proceeded: “Although I guess it won’t be necessary for me to look at that—Ahem! Ah—er—I was just wondering whose body it is, since it can’t possibly be yours. The one they found in the swamp yesterday, I mean.”

Mr. Baxter checked a yawn to inquire with sudden interest: “In the swamp, eh? Out in one of the pools? Well, by ginger!” He started up from

his chair in a state of great excitement. “Why, it must be Tom Sharp’s body. Of all the—”

“Tom Sharp? Who is Tom Sharp? Besides, it isn’t a body. It’s a skeleton, so they say—with its head split open.”

“Tom Sharp,” declared Mr. Baxter with conviction. “Old Wattles told me all about it. Tom Sharp was killed with an ax right out there on the edge of the swamp thirty years ago. Same night the queen came to my house. He—”

“Can’t be,” broke in Mr. Gooch. “The doctors say this fellow has been dead only a year or so.”

“How does anybody know how long a skeleton has been dead?” demanded Mr. Baxter severely. “Of course it’s Tom Sharp. He got smashed over the head with an ax that night by another gypsy whose wife he had run away with. The husband caught up with him at Rumley, after chasing him for months. It’s against the gypsy law for a man to steal another man’s wife. So they never said anything about the killing. Just took Tom Sharp out in the swamp and—er—sort of left him. The fellow that killed him joined the band and went back to living with his wife, who was a girl named Magda. Maybe you recollect her. She was up to my house that night. Her husband died five or six years ago. His widow—Say, Horace, if they think that body is mine, who is supposed to have killed me?”

Mr. Gooch experienced a strange and unsuspected softening of the heart.

“A man that used to work around your place,” said he, after a moment’s hesitation. “He skipped out a few weeks ago,” he added, generously enlarging upon the lie.

Silence fell between them. Mr. Baxter was thinking profoundly, his brow wrinkled, his eyes fixed on one of his bony hands.

“Just so it wasn’t—Oliver,” he said at last, swallowing hard. He had removed the gaudy muffler. His Adam’s apple rose and fell twice convulsively. “I’d hate to have people think he did it.”

“Your pipe’s gone out, Ollie,” said Mr. Gooch brusquely.

“You can’t blame it,” sighed Mr. Baxter, yawning again. “I’m too tired to keep it going.”

Horace busied himself about the stove and at the sink over by the window.

“I guess you won’t mind my asking a question, Ollie,” he said, turning to his brother-in-law. “Seeing that you hate me, what put it into your head to come here to-night and ask for lodging in my house, knowing that I hate you as much as you do me—or more?”

“Well, you see,” began Mr. Baxter, very wistfully and yet shamefacedly, “I’ve been among strangers for so long, Horace, and I’ve been so homesick for some of my own folks that I—well, I sort of felt I’d like to see even you.”

Mr. Gooch pulled at his whiskers for a long time.

“Come to think of it, Ollie,” he said, rather loudly, due to the discovery that the other was having great difficulty in keeping his eyes open, “I guess I’ll have you sleep in that big feather bed in the—er—in my second spare room. How will that suit you? And I’ll let you have a nice, fresh night-shirt. Come along. Better get to bed.”

Mr. Baxter looked at him in a sort of mild, sleepy wonder.

“Why, you’re not half as stingy as I thought you’d be,” said he slowly.

“Anybody that says I am stingy don’t know what he’s talking about,” said Mr. Gooch magnificently.

He escorted his guest up the back stairs and ushered him into the one and only spare room the house afforded.

“Get undressed, Ollie,” said he. “I’ll be back in a minute with the night-shirt.”

He hurried off to his own room. As he opened the door he stopped—aghast.

“Darn my fool hide!” he grated under his breath. “I left that light burning and it’s been going all the time I was downstairs.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Inconsistency in accents has been retained.

When nested quoting was encountered, nested double quotes were changed to single quotes.

[The end of *Oliver October* by George Barr McCutcheon]