

ГОВАРД ПАЙЛ

A MODERN
ALADDIN

Говард Пайл
A Modern Aladdin

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Содержание

PROLOGUE	5
АКТ I	7
Scene First. —A street in Flourens, the house of the late Jean Munier, tailor, in the foreground	7
Scene Second. —Midnight in Flourens; a flood of moonlight falling across the bare and naked street, mystic, colorless	10
Scene Third. —Paris	13
Scene Fourth. —The three mysterious rooms	16
Scene Fifth. —The same	20
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	22

Howard Pyle

A Modern Aladdin / or, The Wonderful Adventures of Oliver Munier

PROLOGUE

The Comte de St. Germaine was a real historical character. Of all the many adventurers brilliant and volatile that flitted across the polished surface of Parisian life during the gay butterfly days of La Pompadour, none was more interesting, none left a more fascinating reflection, than he. No one knew who he was, no one knew his antecedents, no one knew whence he came, but there he suddenly appeared, to shine transiently and somewhat luridly for a year or two in a certain heaven of quasi high life.

Nothing could have been more sudden than his advent. One day he was unheard of; the next, all the world talked of him, gazed at him, and wondered. Great people adopted him and made much of him; courtiers and cabinet ministers bowed to him; the king petted him, talked with him in his privy closet by the hour, and held long and intimate discourse with him. He possessed the rare and distinguished privilege of a free and familiar entrée to Madame de Pompadour's dressing-room – a crowning honor, and one only enjoyed by the greatest and most favored courtiers.

And, indeed, the Parisian world had more cause to wonder and to marvel at him than at many another star that shone at different times in that firmament. First it was a whisper that got about that he was three, some said four, and others five hundred years old. Then it was said that there were those who had known him, gay, handsome, brilliant, fifty years before – as gay, as handsome, as brilliant. Then came a second whispering rumor – that he was the richest man in the world – a rumor also somewhat confirmed, for there were those, whose word was indisputable, who vouched to his having shown them incalculable treasures of diamonds. He himself never laid claim either to the extreme age or to the incalculable treasure, but the world claimed the one and talked of the other for him. And all the talk and gossip seemed to be built upon good foundation.

For example, said Madame de Pompadour to him one day, "But you do not tell us your age, and yet the Comtess de Gergy, who was ambadress at Vienna more than fifty years ago, says that she saw you there then exactly the same as you now appear."

"It is quite true, madame," replied St. Germaine, quietly, "that I knew Madame de Gergy many years ago."

"But, according to her account, you must be more than a hundred years old?"

"That is not impossible," said he; and then added, laughing, "but it is quite possible that the countess is in her dotage."

As for his vast wealth, that also stood upon substantial foundation. The Baron de Sleichen says, in his Memoirs, that one day the count showed him so many diamonds that he thought he saw all the treasures of Aladdin's lamp spread out before him. He showed Madame de Pompadour a little box of precious stones worth more than half a million livres. Says Madame de Hausset: "The count came to see Madame de Pompadour, who was very ill. He showed her diamonds enough to furnish a king's treasury. At still another time, when a number of the principal courtiers were present, he visited madame's apartments wearing magnificent diamond knee and shoe buckles. At her request he went into an adjoining apartment and removed them for closer inspection. They were worth, M. de Gontat said, not less than twenty thousand livres."

So it came about that the Comte de St. Germaine shone, a brilliant star in his firmament, for a while; then suddenly he vanished, and the Parisian world saw him no more. For six days that world wondered and speculated concerning his disappearance; then, on the seventh day, it forgot him.

ACT I

Scene First. —*A street in Flourens, the house of the late Jean Munier, tailor, in the foreground*

Flourens was a little town lying quite out of the usual route of young English travellers of rich connections making the "grand tour," and so, having nothing to recommend it in itself, was unknown to the great world without – dull, stupid, stagnant. Hardly ever a visitor from that great outside world appeared within the circle of its hopeless isolation. So it was a very strange thing to the town when one morning a great coach, as big as a house, dragged by four horses, with postilions clad in scarlet faced with blue, their legs incased in huge jack-boots, and each with a club queue as thick as his wrist hanging down his back, came whirling, rattling, lumbering, in the midst of a swirling cloud of dust, into the silence of the town. It was twice wonderful when the coach stopped at the inn, and it was thrice wonderful when an odd, lean, wizened little man, evidently the servant, let down the steps and helped a strange gentleman from within. He was a tall, dark gentleman, dressed in black from head to foot – from the black hat with the black feather to the black silk stockings. From the gentleman's shoulder hung a long black cloak trimmed and lined with black fur, and Flourens had never seen his like before. He neither looked to the right nor to the left, but, without saying good or bad to any living soul, he and the odd, lean little servant entered the inn, leaving the crowd that stood without staring and gaping after him. Then the great coach disappeared through the arched gate that led to the stable-yard, but it was a long time before the crowd began to disperse, before the gossiping began to cease, before the cloud of silence and dullness and stagnation settled by degrees upon the town again. How it was maybe an hour and a half, and the last of those who had looked and wondered had gone about their business.

All is quiet, dull, heavily silent again, and in all the bald stretch of road nothing is to be seen but two women gossiping at a gate-way, and a solitary cat upon a garden wall watching two sparrows chirping and fluttering upon the eaves.

It is with this setting that the play opens, and Oliver Munier, the son of the late Jean Munier, is discovered leaning against the wall of the house, basking in the sun, his blouse tucked up, his hands in his pockets, and a straw in his mouth, which he now and then chews passively in drowsy laziness. Within, his mother is busied about the house-work, now and then rattling and stirring among the pots and pans, now and then scolding at him in a shrill, high-pitched voice, to which he listens with half-shut eyes, chewing his straw the while.

"I know not," said she, stopping for a moment in her work that her words might have more force in the pause – "I know not whether thou wert born so, but thou art the laziest scamp that ever my two eyes saw. Here art thou eighteen years old, and yet hast never earned a single sou to pay for keeping body and soul together since thy poor father died five months ago. Poor soul! with him it was snip, snip, snip, stitch, stitch, stitch. There was never a tailor in Picardy like him. His poor legs were bent like crooked billets from sitting cross-legged, and his poor fingers were as rough as horn from the prick of the needle. Thou lazy vagabond, with him it was work, work, work."

"Perhaps," said Oliver, without turning his head, "it was hard work that killed my poor father."

"Perhaps it was," said his mother; "but it will never do thee a harm."

Oliver shifted the straw he was chewing from one side of his mouth to the other. "Very well," said he. "Is not one in the family enough to die of the same thing?"

"Humph!" said his mother, and went back to her work with more clatter than ever.

Just then, at the farther end of the street, the inn door opened, and the strange gentleman in black came out, followed first by his servant, and then by Pierre, the landlord. He stopped for a moment at the head of a flight of stone steps, and Pierre pointed, as Oliver thought, towards their house. Then the strange gentleman came slowly down the steps, and picking his way around the puddles where the water from the trough flowed across the road and followed by his servant, came down the street towards where Oliver stood. At his coming a sudden breeze of interest seemed to awaken in the street. The two gossips turned and looked after him; the cat sat up on the wall, and also looked; and the two sparrows stopped chirping, and seemed to look. Two or three women appeared at the door-ways with children; three or four heads were thrust out at the windows, and Oliver, taking his hands out of his pockets, removed the straw that he might see better without the interruption of chewing.

The strange gentleman, when he had come to within a little distance of Oliver, stopped, and beckoning to the little lean serving-man who followed him, held a short whispered talk with him. The little lean serving-man nodded, and then the stranger came straight across the street.

Oliver gaped like a fish.

"You are Oliver Munier?" said the strange gentleman.

"Yes," said Oliver, "I am."

The strange gentleman opened his arms, and before Oliver knew what had happened, he found himself being embraced in the open street, with all those looking on.

"I am thy uncle," said the strange gentleman, with a gulp, and thereupon, releasing Oliver, he took a fine cambric handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his eyes.

Oliver stood dumb and gaping. He did not know whether he was asleep or awake. "My uncle!" he repeated, stupidly, at last.

"Yes, thy uncle."

"My uncle!" repeated Oliver again.

"And thy dear mother?" asked the strange gentleman.

"She is in the house," said Oliver; and then he called, "Mother! mother!"

And his mother, stopping the clattering with the pots and pans, came to the door, and then, seeing a strange gentleman, stood quite still and stared.

"Mother," said Oliver, "here is a man who says he is my uncle."

"Your what?" said his mother.

"My uncle."

"Your uncle?"

"His uncle," said the strange gentleman.

"I never knew the child had one," said Oliver's mother.

"What," said the strange gentleman. "Did Jean Marie never speak of me – his brother Henri? Ah me! Well, perhaps he was ashamed of me, for I was the black-sheep of the flock. I have been to the Americas ever since I ran away from home two-and-thirty years ago, and now I have come back rich – very rich."

At the word "rich," Oliver's mother started as if she had been stung. "Oliver," she cried, "why do you stand gaping there like a stupid sot? You lazy vagabond, bring your uncle into the house! And you, Monsieur Brother, come in, come in!" And she almost dragged the strange gentleman through the door-way. "Brush your uncle a chair, Oliver, brush your uncle a chair! There, Monsieur Brother, that is very good. Now will you not sit down and rest after having come all the way from the Americas?"

"My servant – " began the strange gentleman.

"We have room for him also; we have room for him as well," said Oliver's mother. "Come, Monsieur Servant. Oliver, dust him a chair also."

"Very good," said the strange gentleman; "but it is not that. I had thought that a little supper – "

"He shall have his supper," said Oliver's mother. "There is enough for him and for all the rest of us; but no thanks to that son of mine for that. As lazy a vagabond as ever you saw, Monsieur Brother."

He, too, might have been a tailor, as was his father; but no, he will not work. He would rather beg or starve than work."

"That is of no importance," said the strange gentleman. "Oliver will have no need to work; we shall make a gentleman of Oliver. But I was about to say that I have ordered a little supper at the inn, and my servant will go and bring it. Go, Gaspard, and see that all is done well. In the mean time let us talk over family matters among ourselves. See, here am I, come, as I said, from the Americas, and without a soul belonging to me but my servant Gaspard. Let us, then, all live together – you, my sister, and Oliver and me and Gaspard. To-night I will sleep here in your house. To-morrow Oliver and I shall go to Paris and choose another lodging, for this is a poor place for the sister and the nephew of a rich American to live."

Oliver's mother looked around her. "Yes," said she, "that is true. It is a poor place, a very poor place."

"Here is Gaspard with the little supper," said Oliver's new uncle.

Some one had knocked. Oliver opened the door, and Gaspard came in, followed by Jacques, the man from the inn, carrying a great basket upon his head. Oliver and his mother stared with open eyes and mouths, for they had never seen such a little supper as the ugly servant had fetched from the inn.

"Gaspard saw to the cooking," said the new uncle. "Gaspard is a famous cook, and I do not know how I could get along without him."

Oliver watched the servant furtively, and the longer he looked the more he felt something that made his skin creep. The servant was, as was said, a little thin, wiry man, and he had a lean, livid face and straight black hair that almost met the slanting eyebrows; he had a pair of little twinkling black eyes, mouse-like and cunning; he had thin, blue, grinning lips that showed every now and then beneath them a set of large white teeth; he had a long, sharp chin that stuck out like that of a punchinello; he was unpleasant to look at, but then he was a good servant – yes, he was a good servant; he might have had felt upon his feet for all the noise he made, and he spread the table with only a faint chink or tingle now and then to show that he was at work. So Oliver sat watching him from under his brows, while the new uncle talked with his mother.

At last Gaspard drew back from the table and bowed.

"Come," said the new uncle, drawing up a chair, "let us have supper."

Scene Second. —*Midnight in Flourens; a flood of moonlight falling across the bare and naked street, mystic, colorless*

Oliver felt himself rising like a bubble through the black waters of sleep. A noise, a shrill, penetrating noise, was ringing in his ears, and then suddenly, as the bubble breaks, he became wideawake and sat up. At first he did not know where he was; then he remembered the strange gentleman – his new-found uncle – and knew that he was in the garret, and that the uncle was sleeping upon his (Oliver's) bed in the room below. So recollection came back to his newly awakened senses by bits and pieces, but all the while the shrill, penetrating sound rang in his ears. It was like, and yet it was unlike, the crying of a cat. It was the same high-pitched, tremulous strain, like the wailing of an impish baby; yet there was a difference – a subtle difference – between the crying of a cat and the long-drawn, quavering, unearthly sound that he heard, voiceless and inarticulate, in the silent loneliness of the midnight and the bewilderment of his new awakening – a difference that set his limbs to shaking, and sent the chills crawling up and down his back like cold fingers.

The sound that he heard neither rose nor fell, but continued to shrill on and on through the silence without, as though it would never come to an end. Then suddenly it ceased. Oliver sat in darkness upon the garret floor, with the blankets gathered about his chin, his teeth chattering and rattling and his limbs shuddering, partly through nervous, partly through actual chill. "Chicker, chicker, click!" sounded his teeth loudly in the hush of silence that followed. It seemed as though that silence was even harder to bear than the sound itself. "It was only a cat, it was only a cat," he muttered to himself. Then, "The devil! there it is again!"

Yes, that same strange noise was beginning again; at first so faint that Oliver was not sure that he heard it, then rising higher and higher and more and more keen. "It is only a cat, it is only a cat," muttered Oliver, faintly. He felt his scalp creeping.

Again the noise ceased as suddenly as before into the same death-like silence.

Some one was stirring in the room below; it was the American uncle. A great wave of relief swept over Oliver to find that another besides himself was awake. The next moment he heard the window that looked out into the street beneath softly and cautiously raised.

Near where he lay was an open unglazed window. It looked out into the moonlight just above the one that he had heard raised in the room below. A faint thrill of curiosity began to stir in the depth of the chaos of his fright. Strengthened by the companionship of wakefulness, he crept softly to the square hole and peered fearfully out.

The houses across the way stood black and silent against the pale moonlit sky behind. The street between was bathed in the white glamour. In the middle of it and facing the house stood the motionless figure of a woman wrapped in the folds of a long black cloak. Just below Oliver was the window that he had heard softly raised a moment since, and out of it a head was looking. Oliver could only see the back of the head, but he knew very well that it was the American uncle's. He must have made some noise, for the head suddenly turned and looked up. He drew back with a keen thrill, afraid – but not knowing why he was afraid – of being seen. For a while he stood waiting and listening with bated breath and a beating heart, but all was silent below. Then again he peeped cautiously out over the window-sill; the head below was gone now, but the silent, motionless figure in the street was yet there.

At that moment she looked up, and Oliver saw her face. It was beautiful, but as livid as death; just such a face as might utter the sound that had awakened him to his blind terror. The eyes were fixed upon him, but not as though they saw him, and he leaned far out of the window, gazing fascinated. Presently the thin lips parted, he saw the white teeth glitter in the moonlight, and for the third time he heard that quavering, unearthly wail break out upon the night.

Suddenly the door of the house beneath opened noiselessly, and two figures stepped out into the pale glamour. One was the American uncle, the other was the clever servant Gaspard. The latter carried over his arm something that looked like a long black cloak. At their coming the sound instantly ceased, and the woman slowly turned her white ghostly face towards them. The American uncle strode up to her and caught her fiercely by the wrist, but she moved no more than if she had been dead. Oliver saw the American uncle stand looking this way and that, like one seeking for some escape; then he looked at Gaspard. The clever servant was mouthing and grimacing in a horrible, grotesque manner. Oliver could see him as plain as day, for the white moonlight shone full in his lean grisly face. He opened what he carried upon his arm; it was a long, black, bag-like hood.

Once again the tremulous, wailing cry cut through the night, at first faint, then rising higher and higher and clearer and clearer. Oliver saw his uncle shudder. Gaspard grinned; he crouched together, and held the black bag open in his hands. Oliver heard the American uncle utter a sharp word that he could not understand, and saw him fling the wrist he held away from him.

What next passed happened in an instant. There was a leap, a swift, silent, horrible struggle, and the sound was stilled. Gaspard had drawn the black bag over the woman's head and shoulders. Then, without pausing an instant, he picked her up, flung her limp and helpless form over his shoulder like a sack of grain, turned, and with noiseless feet ran swiftly down the street. Oliver watched him as he ran into an inky shadow, flitted across a patch of moonlight, disappeared in a shadow again, appeared, disappeared, was gone. "My God!" he muttered to himself; "the bridge and the river are down there. Would he – "

When he looked again he saw that his uncle had gone back into the house.

For a long time the street below lay deserted in the silence of the moonlight. In the stillness Oliver could hear the far-away sound of running water and the distant barking of a dog. He leaned against the side of the window, watching with fascinated interest for the return of the serving-man. At last he thought that he saw a movement far down upon the moonlit street. It was Gaspard returning, without his burden. He appeared, disappeared, passed through the silent blocks of shadow, of moonlight, of shadow, with the same swift, noiseless steps, until he reached the road in front of the house. Then he stopped short; there was a momentary pause, and then he looked quickly and suddenly up. It was the face of a grinning devil from hell that Oliver saw.

Their glances met; Gaspard's eyes glistened in the moonlight. That meeting of glances was but for an instant. The next, Gaspard clapped his hands to the pit of his stomach, and bending over, writhed and twisted and doubled himself in a convulsion of silent, crazy laughter. After a while he straightened himself again, and as Oliver gazed, fascinated, he suddenly began an uncouth, grotesque dance. Around and around he spun, hopping and bobbing up and down; around, around, with his black shadow – pot-bellied, long-limbed, and spider-like – hopping beneath him. So hopping and bobbing, with wagging head and writhing, twisting limbs, he drew nearer and nearer to the door. Another leap, and he had hopped into the house, and the street was silent and deserted once more in the white moonlight.

For a while Oliver continued leaning out of the window, dazed, bewildered with what he had seen. Then he slowly drew his head in again, and with trembling limbs and quaking body crawled back to his blankets that lay in a heap upon the floor in the darkness. He heard a distant clock strike two; he would have given ten years of his life for a ray of good, honest sunlight.

The Morning

"Did the cats annoy you last night?" said Oliver's mother, as they sat at breakfast.

"No," said the new uncle. Gaspard and he looked as if they had never opened their eyes the whole night through.

Oliver sat with the untasted breakfast before him, heavily burdened with the recollection of what he had seen. For one moment he woke to the question and answer, and wondered vaguely whether the little supper of the night before had given him the nightmare. Then his heart sank back, heavier than ever, for he knew that what he had seen he had seen with his waking eyes.

Suddenly the new uncle looked up. "We will start for Paris," said he, "at nine o'clock."

Oliver's heart thrilled at the words. It was on his tongue to say, "I do not want to go to Paris," but Gaspard's mouse-like eyes were fixed upon him, and he gulped, shuddered, and sat silent.

Scene Third. —Paris

It was all like the hideous unreality of a nightmare to poor Oliver. For twelve hours they had travelled on and on and on, Oliver and those two dreadful mysterious beings, with only a brief stop now and then to change horses, and now and then for a bite to eat. At such times that one whom Oliver afterwards knew as "the master," got out and walked up and down, while the other attended to his duties as servant. But Oliver always sat still, and shrunk together in the corner of the coach, weighed down with the tremendous remembrance of what had passed the night before, and by no less looming apprehensions of what was to come. Gaspard always brought him something to eat, but he had no appetite for the food, and he shuddered at the lean, grisly face whenever it appeared at the door of the coach.

Then again the master would enter, and they would resume the never-ending journey. At last, overpowered by the continued intensity of the strain, Oliver fell into an uneasy sleep, in which all manner of ugly visions flitted through his mind. At last the sudden thunderous rumbling of the coach over stony streets aroused him again, and when he awoke it was to find himself in Paris. He unclosed his eyes and looked stonily out of the window. He had fallen asleep while the sun was still quite high in the sky; now it was night. The lights from the street lanterns flashed in at the window, traversed the gloomy interior of the coach, and then flashed out again; a perpetual glare shone from the windows of shops and stores; hundreds of people, passing and repassing, came and went; but poor Oliver, bewildered and stupefied, saw and felt all as a part of those dull, leaden dreams that had disturbed him in his sleep.

Nevertheless he noticed that as they still rumbled on and on, the lights grew less and less brilliant and frequent and that the travellers grew less and less numerous; that the streets grew crooked and narrower, and the dark and gloomy houses upon either hand more ancient and crazy.

Suddenly, in a space of darkness, a hand was laid upon his knee, and a voice spoke his name – "Oliver!" He started wide awake, and a keen, sharp pang shot through him. Just then they again passed a lantern, and as the light traversed the interior of the great coach it flashed across the face of his companion thrust close to his own. The cloak which he had wrapped around him after nightfall had fallen away, his eyes shone with a strange light, and his lips were parted with a strange smile. "Were you frightened at what you saw last night?" he said.

Oliver felt as though a thunder-bolt had fallen. Twice or thrice he strove to speak, but his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth, and refused to utter a sound; he could only nod his head. The very worst thing that he feared had happened to him. He was so frightened that it gave him the stomachache. What was to befall him next? It was through a veil of dizzy terror that he looked into that face shut up with him in the narrow confines of the coach. All had become darkness again; but in the humming silence the eyeballs of his soul still saw that strangely smiling face as the eyes of his body had seen it when the lantern light flashed upon it. He crouched in his corner, shrunk together like a rabbit before the face of a serpent. Again there came another traversing flash of light, and then he saw that the face had widened to a grin.

"And you know that I am not your rich uncle from the Americas?"

Oliver nodded his head once more.

The other began laughing. "Come," said he; "you are frightened. But I am not so bad as you take me to be, or Gaspard either, for the matter of that, though he has strange habits. Also you saw what he did last night?"

For the third time Oliver nodded his head. His throat grew tighter and tighter, and he felt as though he would choke.

"Very well," said the other. "Then you understand that Gaspard and I are not to be trifled with. We are now at the end of our journey, and there is something that I would have you do for me. It was

for that that I hunted you up at Flourens, and it was for that that I brought you here to Paris. If you do my bidding, no harm shall happen to you; if not – " The hand which rested upon Oliver's knee gripped it like the clutch of a hawk. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," croaked Oliver, finding his voice at last.

"Very good," said the other. "Now when we stop I shall get out first of all, then you, then Gaspard. He will follow close behind us, and if you make so much as one noise, one little outcry – " The speaker stopped abruptly. They were now in the black gloom of a crooked, unlighted street, with high walls beetling upon either side, but even in the blackness of the gloom Oliver could feel that the other made a motion with his hands as though drawing a sack or bag over his head, and he shrank together closer than ever.

Then suddenly the coach stopped. The next moment the door was flung open, and there stood Gaspard waiting. Oliver's companion stepped out upon the pavement. "Come," said he, and there was that in his voice that told Oliver that there was but one thing to do – to obey. The poor lad's legs and arms moved with a jerky, spasmodic movement, as though they did not belong to him, and Gaspard had to help him out of the coach, or else he would have fallen upon the pavement.

"That is good," said his travelling companion when he at last stood upon the sidewalk. "Our legs are cramped by sitting so long, but we will be better by the time we have walked a little distance;" and he slipped his hand under Oliver's arm.

Oliver groaned.

The moon had now risen, and though it did not reach the pavement, the still pallid light bathed the upper stories of the houses upon the other side of the street above the sharp black demarcation of the lower shadows. They passed two or three strange spirit-like shapes, ragged and wretched; but soon leaving even these behind, and turning down a sudden crooked way, they came to a dark, lonely, narrow court, utterly deserted, and silent as death. At the farther side of this court was a brick wall, black with moss and mildew. Upon this wall the pallid moonlight lay full and bright, showing a little arched door-way that seemed to lead through it to, perhaps, a garden upon the other side. Here they stopped, and Gaspard, stepping forward, drew from his pocket two rusty keys tied together by a piece of twisted parchment. He chose one of the keys, and thrust it into the lock of the gate. The lock was old and rusty. Gaspard twisted at the key until his bony fingers were livid, then with a grating noise the key slowly turned in the rusty lock. The gate opened – not into the garden, as Oliver had expected to see, but into the inky darkness of the passage-way built into the wall.

"Come, my child," said Oliver's companion. "Come with me, and Gaspard will follow behind and close the gate."

Oliver looked about him with helplessly despairing eyes. Not a soul was in sight but the two. There was no help, no hope; there was nothing to do but to follow. He stepped into the passage-way after the other. The next moment Gaspard closed the gate, and he found himself in inky blackness.

"Take my hand and follow," said he who led; and his voice echoed and reverberated up and down the hollow darkness. Oliver reached blindly out until he touched the unseen hand.

With shuffling feet they moved slowly along the passage-way for the distance of twenty or thirty paces, the American uncle leading the way and holding Oliver by the hand, and Gaspard following so close behind them that sometimes it seemed to Oliver that he could feel the other's hot breath blowing upon his neck. Suddenly Oliver's guide stopped for a moment, and Oliver could hear him feeling with his feet upon the floor in front of him. Then again his echoing voice sounded, reverberating through the darkness. "Take care of the steps," said he, "for they are narrow and slippery."

In answer Oliver felt out instinctively with his foot. His toe touched the edge of a step, the first of a flight that led steeply downward into the darkness.

Down, down they went, Oliver in the middle and the other behind.

"We are at the bottom of the steps," said the echoing voice in front of Oliver, and the next instant he felt the startling jar of missing a step. Although the blackness was impenetrable, it seemed

to Oliver that they had now reached a large room, for their footsteps echoed with a hollow sound, as though from high walls and a vaulted roof. His guide laid a hand upon his arm, and at the signal he stopped. Presently he heard Gaspard fumbling and rustling, and the next moment a shower of sparks were struck with flint and steel. As the tinder blazed under his breathing, Oliver saw that Gaspard leaned over a small brazen vase that sat upon the ground. He lighted a match and dropped it into the vase, and instantly a vivid greenish light blazed up, dancing now higher, now lower, and lighting up all the surrounding space. Then Oliver saw that he was indeed in a high, vaulted, cellar-like apartment, without window or other entrance than that through which they had come. In the centre of this vaulted space, and not far from where they stood, was a trap-door of iron, to which was attached an iron ring; a wide, heavy iron bar, fastened to the floor at one end by a hinge and at the other by a staple and padlock, crossed the iron plate, and locked it to the floor. Again Gaspard drew out the two keys, and fitting the second into the padlock, gave it a turn. The padlock gaped. He loosed it from the staple, and swung back the iron bar, creaking and grating upon its rusty hinge; then, clutching the ring in the lid of the trap, he bent his back and heaved. The iron plate swung slowly and heavily up, and as Oliver looked down, he saw a glimmering flight of stone steps that led into the yawning blackness beneath.

Gaspard reached down into the square hole, and after fumbling around for a moment, drew forth an ancient rusty lantern with the end of a half-burnt candle still in it, which he proceeded to light.

Then he who was the master spoke again. "Oliver, my child," said he, smoothly, "down below there are three rooms; in the farthest room of the three is a small stone pillar, and on it are two bottles of water. Bring them up here to me, and I will make you so rich that you shall never want for anything more in this world."

"Am I – am I to go down there alone?" said Oliver, hoarsely.

"Yes," said the other, "alone; but we, Gaspard and I, will wait here for you."

"And what then?"

"Then I will make you rich."

Oliver looked into the face of the other. In its cold depth he saw something that chilled his heart to the very centre. He turned, and, leaning forward, gazed stupidly down into the gaping hole at his feet; then he drew back. "My God!" he said, "I – cannot go – down there alone."

"But you must go," said the other.

"I – I cannot go alone," said Oliver again.

The other turned his head. "Gaspard!" said he. That was all; but the perfect servant understood. He stepped forward and laid his hand upon Oliver's wrist, and his fingers were like steel wires.

Oliver looked into his face with wide eyes. He saw there that which he had seen the night before. "I – will – go," said he, in a choking voice.

He reached out blindly a hand as cold as death, and trembling as with a palsy. One of the others, he knew not which, thrust the lantern into it. Then he turned mechanically, and, automaton-like, began descending the narrow steps. There were ten or a dozen of them, leading steeply downward, and at the bottom was a small vestibule a few feet square. Oliver looked back, and saw the two faces peering down at him through the square opening above; then he turned again. In front of him was an arched door-way like that through which he had first come. On the wall around the door-way and on the floor was painted a broad, blood-red, unbroken line, with this figure marked at intervals upon it:

The door was opened a crack. Oliver reached out and pushed it, and then noiselessly, even in that dead silence, it swung slowly open upon the darkness within.

Scene Fourth. — *The three mysterious rooms*

Oliver hesitated a moment, and then entered the cavernous blackness beyond. There he stopped again, and stood looking about him by the dusky glimmer of the lantern, which threw round swaying patches of light upon the floor and on the ceiling above, and three large squares of yellow light upon the walls around.

Oliver wondered dully whether he was in a dream, for such a place he had never beheld before in all his life. Upon the floor lay soft, heavy rugs and carpets, blackened and mildewed with age, but still showing here and there gorgeous patches of coloring. Upon the wall hung faded tapestry and silken hangings draped in dark, motionless, mysterious folds. Around stood divans and couches covered with soft and luxurious cushions embroidered with silk long since faded, and silver thread long since tarnished to an inky blackness.

In the middle of the room stood an ebony table inlaid with ivory and mother-of-pearl; above it hung a lamp inlaid with gold and swung from the arched stone ceiling above by three golden chains. Beside the table stood a chair of some dark red wood, richly inlaid like the table, with ivory and mother-of-pearl, and by the chair leaned a lute ready strung, as though just laid aside by the performer, though the strings, long untouched, were thick and fuzzy with green mildew. Upon the chair was a tasselled cushion, one time rich and ornate, now covered with great blotches of decay. Upon the table were two golden trays – one of them containing a small mass of mildew that might at one time have been fruit or confections of some sort; the other, an empty glass vase or decanter as clear as crystal, but stained with the dry dregs of wine, and two long crystal glasses, one of them upset and with the stem broken. In a dim distant corner of this one-time magnificent room stood a draped couch or bed, with heavy hangings tattered and stained with rot, the once white linen mildewed and smeared with age.

All these things Oliver saw as he stood in the door-way looking slowly and breathlessly around him; then, of a sudden, his heart tightened and shrunk together, the lantern in his hand trembled and swayed, for upon the bed, silent and motionless, he saw the dim, dark outline of a woman's figure lying still and silent.

"Who – who is there?" he quavered, tremulously; but no answering voice broke the silence.

As he stood there, with his heart beating and thumping in his throat, with beads of cold sweat standing on his forehead, and now and then swallowing at the dryness in his throat, a fragment of the hangings above the bed, loosened perhaps by the breath of air that had come in through the open door behind, broke from its rotten threads, and dropped silent and bat-like to the floor. Oliver winked rapidly in the intensity of high-keyed nervous strain. How long he stood there he could never tell, but suddenly the voice of the master breathed through the stillness behind him and from above: "Hast thou found the bottles of water?"

Oliver started, and then, with the same jerky automaton-like steps with which he had descended the stone stair-way from above, he began crossing the room to the arrased door-way which he dimly distinguished upon the other side of the apartment.

Midway he stopped, and, turning his head, looked again at the silent figure lying upon the bed. He was nearer to it now, and could see it more clearly in the dim yellow light of the lantern. The face was hidden, but the floating, wavy hair, loosened from a golden band which glimmered faintly in the raven blackness, lay spread in shadow-like masses over the stained and faded surface of the silken pillow upon which the head lay.

Impelled by a sudden impulse of a grotesque curiosity, Oliver, after a moment's hesitation, crept slowly and stealthily towards that silent occupant of the silent room, holding his lantern forward at arm's-length before him.

As the advancing light crept slowly around the figure, Oliver saw first one thing and then another. First, the quaint and curious costume of a kind of which he had never seen before, woven of rich and heavy silk, and rendered still more stiff by the seed-pearls with which it was embroidered. Then the neck and breast, covered by the folds of a faded silken scarf. Then, as the light crept still farther around the figure, he saw it twinkle upon a gold and jewelled object.

Oliver knew very well what it was, and his knees smote together when he saw it. It was the haft of a dagger, and the blade was driven up to the guard into the silent bosom. He raised the lantern still farther, and the light shone full in the face. Oliver gave a piping cry, and, stumbling backward, nearly let fall the lantern upon the floor. He had seen the face of a grinning skull gazing with hollow, sightless sockets, into his own eyes.

For a while Oliver stood in the middle of the room, staring with blank, stony horror at the silent figure. Then for a second time the voice of the watcher above breathed through the silence – "Have you found the water yet?"

Oliver turned stupidly, and with dull, heavy steps passed through the door-way into the room beyond, holding the lantern before him.

Here, again, were the same rotting, mildewed richness and profusion, but they were of a different character. A long table in the centre of the room, covered with the remnant of what had once been a white linen table-cloth, and set with blackened and tarnished plates and dishes, and dust-covered goblets, and beakers of ancient cut and crystal-like glass, showed that it was a dining apartment into which he had now come. Two richly-carved chairs, with their indented cushions, were pushed back as though their occupant had but just now quitted them.

Oliver felt a wave of relief; here was no silent figure to frighten him with its ghostly, voiceless presence.

Upon the other side of this room was another tapestried door-way similar to that through which he had just entered. Passing through it, he found himself in a low, narrow passage, barred at the farther end by a heavy iron-bound door, worm-eaten and red with the stain of rust, and with great wrought-iron hinges spreading out upon its surface like twisted fingers. Oliver pressed his foot against it. It was not locked, and it swung slowly and stiffly open with a dull groaning of the rusty hinges. Within was a stone-paved apartment, very different from those which he had just left.

All around were scattered quaint and curious jars and retorts of coarse glass and metal. Rows of bottles of different shapes and sizes stood upon the shelves, and in the corner was a great heap of mouldering, dusty books, huge of size, and fastened with metal clasps. Built into the middle of the farther wall was a wide brick chimney-place, black with ancient soot, wherein were several furnaces of different sizes, all long since cold, and with the sparks of fiery life dead in their bosoms. Nevertheless, everything had been left as though the room had been newly deserted. One pot-bellied retort reclined tipsily upon its bed of cold gray ashes; a mortar stood upon the hob of another furnace with the pestle in it; a book, held open by a glass rod across the pages, lay near by, as though for reference.

In the centre of the room stood a square pillar or table of stone, and upon it were two bottles containing a clear, limpid liquid, in appearance like distilled water. Each was stoppered with glass, and sealed besides with a great mass of blood-red wax. Upon each of the bottles was pasted a square parchment label. One was marked in red pigment, thus – . The other was marked thus – in black. Oliver knew that these were the bottles for which he had been sent.

He hesitated a moment; then, reaching forth his hand, he took first one and then the other, and thrust them into his pocket.

He had reached the ending of his task.

Then of a sudden it was as though a wave of renewed life swept over him.

He thought nothing of the greater dangers that must still await him above, at the mouth of the trap, though he had there read death in the master's eyes. He was unreasonably, unthinkingly elated; it was as though he had reached the ending of a long nightmare journey, and as though his

face was turned towards the light again. It was with firmer and less fearful steps that he retraced his way through the dining-room and the room beyond, where lay that silent, grisly sleeper, and so came to the door-way with the blood-red line drawn around it.

Then he stopped and looked up.

At the square mouth of the shaft he saw the two faces still peering down at him, the face of Gaspard and the face of the master side by side.

Again, and for the third time, the master asked him the question, "Have you found the bottles of water?"

"Yes," said Oliver, "I have found them."

"Then give them to me," said the other, in a ringing voice, and he reached his arm down towards Oliver where he still stood in the door-way, around which was drawn the blood-red line.

In the reaction from the prostration of fear which had been upon Oliver for all this time, in the new elation which possessed him, it was as though he had come up from out of the dark waters which had overwhelmed him, and stood again upon the firm ground of courage.

"Yes," said he, "very good, my dear American uncle, but wait a little; what then is to come of me if I give you these two bottles of water?"

The other drew back his hand. "Did I not promise," said he, "to make you rich for as long as you lived?"

"Yes," said Oliver, "you did, but I do not believe you. Suppose that I give you these two bottles, how do I then know that you will not bang down that trap upon me, and lock me in here to die alone in a day or two?"

"Then come up here," said the other, "if you are afraid."

"Yes," said Oliver; "but last night I saw something – " He stopped short, for the recollection of it stuck in his throat. "Suppose you should hand me over to Gaspard and his black bag;" and he shuddered with a sudden creep at the thought of it.

The master's face grew as black as thunder, and his eyes shone blue in the light of the lantern. "Peste!" he cried, stamping his foot upon the stone pavement. "Do you chaffer with me? Will you give me the water, or will you not?"

"No," cried Oliver; "not until you promise to let me go safe back home."

"You will not give the bottles to me?"

"No!"

There was a pause for a moment, but only for a moment. Then there was a snarl like the snarl of a wild beast – "Gaspard!" cried the master. As he cried he leaped forward and down, two steps at a time, with the servant at his heels.

Oliver ran back into the room, yelling, stumbled over the corner of a rug, dropped the lantern, and fell flat upon the floor, where he lay, with his face buried in his hands, screaming with terror. In his ears rang a confused noise of snarls and cries and oaths and scuffling feet, but no hand was laid upon him. Moment after moment passed. Oliver raised his face from his hands, and looked fearfully over his shoulder.

At the open door-way stood Gaspard and his master, with white faces and gleaming teeth, dancing and hopping up and down, tossing their hooked, claw-like hands in the air, foaming with rage, snarling and gnashing like wolves. The lantern which Oliver had dropped still burned with a sickly, flickering gleam, for the candle had not gone out, and it was partly by the light of it that he beheld them.

Then, like a flash of lightning, he saw it all: *they could not cross that red line drawn across the door-way.*

Oliver's courage came back to him with a bound. He sat up and looked at them struggling and striving to get at him, and kept back as by an unseen wall of adamant. Instinctively he reached out and raised the overturned lantern, for the light was on the verge of flickering out.

"Promise me that I shall reach home safe and sound," said he, "and you shall yet have the two bottles."

The master did not seem to hear him. Oliver repeated the words. Then suddenly the other ceased from the violence of his gestures and exclamations, shook himself, and stood erect, pulled down his lace cuffs, and wiped his face with his cambric handkerchief. Then he fixed upon Oliver a basilisk glance, and smiled a dreadful smile.

"Gaspard," said he, "let us go."

He turned and walked up the stone steps again, closely followed by his servant, and poor Oliver sat staring stonily after them.

Above, the master gave an order. Oliver heard a grating, grinding noise. There was a crash that echoed clamorously through the stillness, a clanking rattle, a grating screech, a click, and then the silence of death.

Gaspard had shut and locked the trap-door above.

Oliver sat dazed and bewildered by the suddenness of what had happened. Presently he turned his head mechanically and looked around, and his eyes fell upon the silent occupant of the bed.

Then he leaped to his feet, and up the steep flight of stone steps like a madman. He dashed his fist against the cold iron lid above his head. "Open," he shouted – "open and let me out. Let me out and you shall have everything. Here are the bottles of water. Do you not want them?"

He stopped short and listened, crouching upon the upper step, close against the iron lid above him. He fancied he heard a faint sound of footsteps.

"Let me out!" he screamed again.

Nothing but dead, solemn silence.

Oliver ran down the steps again, the accursed glass bottles clicking together in his pocket. In the narrow vestibule below he stood for a moment, gazing down upon the floor in the utter abandonment of blank despair. At last he looked up, and then crawled fearfully forward into the room beyond, lit by the faint glow of the lantern. He sat him down upon the floor, and burst out crying. By-and-by a blind rage filled his heart against the cruelty of his fate and against the man who had brought it all upon him. He sprang to his feet, and began striding up and down the room, muttering to himself and shaking his head. Presently he stopped, raised his clinched fists in the air and shook them. Then he broke into a laugh. "Very well," said he; "but you have not got the bottles of water!" and he felt his pockets; they were still there.

Then, as he stood there feeling the bottles in his pocket, the last misfortune of all happened to him. There was a flare, a sputter, and then – utter darkness.

The light in the lantern had gone out.

Scene Fifth. — *The same*

Oliver stood for a while utterly stupefied by this new blow that had fallen upon him; then, with his hands stretched out in the darkness and feeling before him with his feet, he moved blindly forward. At last he found the lantern where it stood upon the floor, and kneeling down he raised the lid and felt within. Even if he had found a candle, it would have been of no use to him, for he could not have lighted it, but nothing was there but the hot, melted grease in which the wick had expired.

Oliver sat down upon the floor and hid his face upon his knees. How long he sat there he never could tell; it might have been seconds, it might have been minutes, it might have been an hour; for, like one in a broken sleep, there was to him no measurement of time.

Suddenly a thought flashed upon him, like light in the darkness: he remembered the chimney in the room beyond. Why should he not escape in that way? At the thought a great torrent of hope swept upon him; his heart swelled as though it would burst. He rose to his feet, and feeling blindly in the blackness, came first to the table, and then to the tapestried wall beyond. Inch by inch, and foot by foot he felt his way along it, now stumbling over a cushioned couch in the darkness, and now over the edge of one of the rugs. So at last he came to the corner of the room. Thence with outstretched fingers he felt his way along over the silent folds of the hangings until he met the emptiness of the door-way.

In the same manner he crept along the wall of the room beyond, overturning in his passage a light table laden with plates and glasses, that fell with a deafening crash and tinkle of broken glass. Oliver paused for a moment in the bewilderment of the sudden noise, and then began his slow onward way again.

Thus crawling slowly along, and guiding himself by the walls, he came out through the passage-way beyond the dining apartment, and so into the laboratory. Here he had no difficulty in finding the chimney, for the moonlight shed a faint, ghostly light down the broad flue above, glimmering in a pale flickering sheen upon the bottles and glass retorts that stood around.

Creeping cautiously forward, Oliver came to the chimney-place, climbed upon one of the furnaces, and peered upward. Not twenty feet above he could see the silvery moonlit sky. Then his heart sank within him like a plummet of lead. For just over his head were grated bars of iron, thick and ponderous, that, crossing the chimney from side to side, were built into the solid brick and stone masonry of the flue. Oliver clambered down out of the furnace again, and sat him down upon the edge of it. There for a time he perched, staring despairingly into the darkness beyond. "What shall I do next?" he muttered to himself – "what shall I do next?"

It could serve no use for him to stay where he was, among the crucibles and retorts; he might as well go into one of the other rooms. There, at least, would be a comfortable place to rest himself, and he began to feel heavily and stupidly sleepy.

Foot by foot and step by step he felt his way back again into the farthest room. He gave no thought to that other occupant, hushed in the silent sleep of death; but flinging himself down upon the first couch that he found, gathered the musty, mildewed cushions under his head, closed his eyes, and sunk heavily into the depths of a dark, dreamless sleep.

How long Oliver Munier lay in the blankness of this heavy sleep he could never know. It must have been for a great while, as he afterwards discovered. His waking was sudden and sharp, and even before he was fairly awake he knew that he heard a sound.

He opened his eyes wide and listened. There was a soft rustling, a velvety footfall, and the sound of quick, short breathing, in the silent darkness, like that of a little child. Finally he heard a suppressed sneeze.

He sat up upon the couch, and at the noise of his movements the other sound ceased, only for the quick breathing.

"Who is there?" whispered Oliver through the darkness.

For a moment or two the silence was unbroken; then came a dull, monotonous, musical sound, somewhat like the humming of a hive of bees, but rougher and more rattling. Oliver, listening with all his soul, heard the same rustling footsteps as before, and now they were coming straight towards him. There was a moment's pause, and then something leaped upon the couch beside him.

Oliver sat as though turned to stone.

He felt a faint breath upon his hand as it rested upon the cushion at his side, and then something pressed against his wrist and his arm. It was soft, warm, furry. It was a cat.

In the gush of relief at this honest, homely animal companionship Oliver broke down from his tension of nervous strain to laughing and crying at once. Reaching out his hand, he began to stroke the creature, whereupon it bowed its back and rubbed against him in dumb response.

A sudden light flashed upon him. The cat was alive; it was good honest flesh and blood; there was nothing ghostly or demoniacal about it; where it had entered it would have to go forth again, and where it so passed to and fro there must be some means of ingress and egress. Why should he not avail himself of its aid to find his way out into the daylight again?

In a few moments he had torn the mouldy silken covers of one of the cushions into small strips, had twisted these strips into a cord, and had then tied the cord around the cat's neck. Wherever the creature went now he would follow as a blind man follows his dog. He began to whistle in the excess of his relief at the new light of hope which had dawned upon him. The sound awoke shrill echoes in the black vaulted spaces, and he stopped abruptly. "Very well," said he, half aloud. "But nevertheless, my American uncle, here is a new way out of our troubles."

By force of habit he thrust his hands into his pocket; the two bottles of water were still there.

It seemed to Oliver an age before this miraculously sent conductor, this feline saving angel, made ready to take its departure. It was hours; but there was nothing for him to do but to wait patiently for the creature to choose its own time for leaving, for should he undertake to urge it, it might grow frightened and break away from him, and so lose him the clew of escape. Yes, there was nothing to do but to wait patiently until his guide chose to bestir itself.

Oliver was ravenously hungry, but once or twice, in spite of the gnawing of his stomach, he fell into a doze in the dead, monotonous silence of the place. Nevertheless, through all his napping, he held tight to the silken cord. It was from such a doze as this that he was awakened by feeling a twitching at the silken string, which he had wrapped around his hand for the sake of precaution. The cat was stirring.

Oliver loosened the cord so as to give the animal as much freedom as possible, and then rose to his feet. The cat, disturbed by his moving, leaped lightly to the floor. It gave a faint mew, and rubbed once or twice against his legs. Oliver waited with a beating heart. At last the cat started straight across the floor, and Oliver, holding the string, followed after it. The next minute he ran against the corner of the table, stumbled over the chair that stood beside it, overturning the mildewed lute, which fell with a hollow, musical crash.

The cat had gone under the table, and Oliver had perforce to go down upon his hands and knees and follow. When he arose again he was bewildered, and knew not where he was; he had lost his bearings in the blank darkness around him.

The cat had become alarmed, and was now struggling at the string that held it, and Oliver was afraid that it would snap the cord and get away from him. He followed more rapidly, and the next moment pitched headlong across the couch in the corner. The silent occupant rattled dryly, and Oliver heard something fall with a crash upon the floor, roll for a space, and then vibrate into silence. "Oh, *mon Dieu*

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