A GOLDEN WISH, A SHADOWED PATH.

A MODERN ALLADIN

HOWARD PYLE

This edition published 2026
by Living Book Press

ISBN: 978-1-922919-50-2 (hardcover)
978-1-922919-49-6 (softcover)

First published in 1891.

A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

A Modern Aladdin

by

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"Saw A Dull Heavy Smoke Arise To The Ceiling"

Contents

ACT III.—Paris

ACT IV

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 ambassadress 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 apart-

ment 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. Now 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."

"HE WAS A TALL, DARK GENTLEMAN, DRESSED IN BLACK FROM HEAD TO FOOT."

"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

"'I AM THY UNCLE,' SAID THE STRANGE GENTLEMAN."

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 meantime 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

"AT THAT MOMENT SHE LOOKED UP."

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