

Oliver Twist

by Charles Dickens

Introduction

"The Adventures of Oliver Twist," published serially in "Bentley's Miscellany," 1837-39, and in book form in 1838, was the second of Dickens's novels. It lacks the exuberance of "Pickwick," and is more limited in its scenes and characters than any other novel he wrote, excepting "Hard Times" and "Great Expectations." But the description of the workhouse, its inmates and governors, is done in Dickens's best style, and was a frontal attack on the Poor Law administration of the time. Bumble, indeed, has passed into common use as the typical workhouse official of the least satisfactory sort. No less powerful than the picture of Oliver's wretched childhood is the description of the thieves' kitchen, presided over by Fagin. Bill Sikes and the Artful Dodger are household words for criminals, and the character of Fagin is drawn with wonderful skill in this terrible view of the underworld of London.

I.--The Parish Boy

Oliver was born in the workhouse, and his mother died the same night. Not even a promised reward of £10 could produce any information as to the boy's father or the mother's name. The woman was young, frail, and delicate--a stranger to the parish.

"How comes he to have any name at all, then?" said Mrs. Mann (who was responsible for the early bringing up of the workhouse children) to Mr. Bumble, the parish beadle.

The beadle drew himself up with great pride, and said, "I invented it. We name our foundings in alphabetical order. The last was a S; Swubble I named him. This was a T; Twist I named *him*. I have got names ready made to the end of the alphabet, and all the way through it again, when we come to Z."

"Why, you're quite a literary character, sir," said Mrs. Mann.

Oliver, being now nine years old, was removed from the tender mercies of Mrs. Mann, in whose wretched home not one kind word or look had ever lighted the gloom of his infant years, and was taken into the workhouse.

Now the members of the board, who were long-headed men, had just established the rule that all poor people should have the alternative (for they would compel nobody, not they) of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it. All relief was inseparable from the workhouse, and the thin gruel issued three times a day to its inmates.

The system was in full operation for the first six months after Oliver Twist's admission, and boys having generally excellent appetites, Oliver Twist and his companions suffered the tortures of slow starvation. Each boy had one porringer of gruel, and no more. At last the boys got so voracious and wild with hunger, that one, who was tall for his age and hadn't been used to that sort of thing (for his father had kept a small cook's shop), hinted darkly to his companions that unless he had another basin of gruel *per diem* he was afraid he might some night happen to eat the boy who slept next him, a weakly youth of tender age. He had a wild, hungry eye, and they implicitly believed him. A council was held, lots were cast who should walk up to the master after supper that evening and ask for more, and it fell to Oliver Twist.

The evening arrived, the boys took their places. The master, in his cook's uniform, stationed himself at the copper to ladle out the gruel; his pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him, the gruel was served out, and a long grace was said over the short commons.

The gruel disappeared, the boys whispered to each other, and winked at Oliver, while his next neighbours nudged him. Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table, and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said, somewhat alarmed at his own temerity, "Please, sir, I want some more."

The master was a fat, healthy man, but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupified astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds, and then said, "What!"

"Please, sir," replied Oliver, "I want some more."

The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle, pinioned him in his arms, and shrieked aloud for the beadle.

The board were sitting in solemn conclave when Mr. Bumble rushed into the room in great excitement, and addressing a gentleman in a high chair, said, "Mr. Limbkins, I beg your pardon, sir! Oliver Twist has asked for more!"

There was a general start. Horror was depicted on every countenance.

"For *more*?" said the chairman. "Compose yourself, Bumble, and answer me distinctly. Do I understand that he asked for more, after he had eaten the supper allotted by the dietary?"

"He did, sir," replied Bumble.

"That boy will be hung," said a gentleman in a white waistcoat. "I know that boy will be hung."

Nobody disputed the opinion. Oliver was ordered into instant confinement, and a bill was next morning pasted on the outside of the workhouse gate, offering a reward of five pounds to anybody who would take Oliver Twist off their hands. In other words, five pounds and Oliver Twist were offered to any man or woman who wanted an apprentice to any trade, business, or calling.

Mr. Gamfield, the chimney sweep, was the first to respond to this offer.

"It's a nasty trade," said the chairman of the board.

"Young boys have been smothered in chimneys before now," said another member.

"That's because they damped the straw afore they lit it in the chimbley to make 'em come down again," said Gamfield. "That's all smoke, and no blaze; vereas smoke only sinds him to sleep, and that ain't no use in making a boy come down. Boys is wery obstinite and wery lazy, gen'l'men, and there's nothink like a good hot blaze to make 'em come down with a run. It's humane, too, gen'l'men, acause, even if they've stuck in the chimbley, roasting their feet makes 'em struggle to hextricate theirselves."

The board consented to hand over Oliver to the chimney-sweep (the premium being reduced to £3 10s.), but the magistrates declined to sanction the indentures, and it was Mr. Sowerberry, the undertaker, who finally relieved the board of their responsibility.

Mrs. Sowerberry's ill-treatment drove Oliver to flight. He left the house in the early morning before anyone was stirring, struck across fields, and gained the high road outside the town. A milestone intimated that it was seventy miles to London. In London he would be beyond the reach of Mr. Bumble; to London he would trudge.

II.--The Artful Dodger

It was on the seventh morning after he had left his native place that Oliver limped slowly into the town of Barnet. Tired and hungry he sat down on a doorstep, and presently was roused by the question "Hallo, my covey, what's the row?"

The boy who addressed this inquiry to the young wayfarer was about his own age, but one of the queerest-looking boys that Oliver had ever seen. He was short for his age, and dirty, and he had about him all the airs and manners of a man. He wore a man's coat which reached nearly to his heels, and he had turned the cuffs back half-way up his arm to get his hands out of the sleeves. Altogether he was as roystering and swaggering a young gentleman as ever stood four feet six in his bluchers.

"You want grub," said this strange boy, helping Oliver to rise; "and you shall have it. I'm at low-watermark myself, only one bob and a magpie; but as far as it goes, I'll fork out and stump."

"Going to London?" said the strange boy, while they sat and finished a meal in a small public-house.

"Yes."

"Got any lodgings?"

"No."

"Money?"

"No."

The strange boy whistled.

"I suppose you want some place to sleep in to-night, don't you? Well, I've got to be in London to-night, and I know a 'spectable old genelman as lives there, wot'll give you lodgings for nothink, and never ask for the change--that is, if any genelman he knows interduces you."

This unexpected offer of shelter was too tempting to be resisted, and on the way to London, where they arrived at nightfall, Oliver learnt that his friend's name was Jack Dawkins, but that he was known among his intimates as "The Artful Dodger."

In Field Lane, in the slums of Saffron Hill, the Dodger pushed open the door of a house, and drew Oliver within.

"Now, then," cried a voice, in reply to his whistle.

"Plummy and slam," said the Dodger.

This seemed to be a watchword, for a man at once appeared with a candle.

"There's two on you," said the man. "Who's the t'other one, and where does he come from?"

"A new pal from Greenland," replied Jack Dawkins. "Is Fagin upstairs?"

"Yes, he's sortin the wipes. Up with you."

The room that Oliver was taken into was black with age and dirt. Several rough beds, made of old sacks, were huddled side by side on the floor. Seated round the table were four or five boys, none older than the Dodger, smoking long clay pipes, and drinking spirits with the air of middle-aged men. An old shrivelled Jew, of repulsive face, was standing over the fire, dividing his attention between a frying-pan and a clothes-horse full of silk handkerchiefs.

The Dodger whispered a few words to the Jew, and then said aloud, "This is him, Fagin, my friend Oliver Twist."

The Jew grinned. "We are very glad to see you, Oliver--very."

A good supper Oliver had that night, and a heavy sleep, and a hearty breakfast next morning.

When the breakfast was cleared away, Fagin, who was quite a merry old gentleman, and the Dodger and another boy named Charley Bates, played at a very curious game. The merry old gentleman, placing a snuffbox in one pocket of his trousers, a note-book in the other, and a watch in his waistcoat, and sticking a mock diamond pin in his shirt, and spectacle-case and handkerchief in his coat-pocket, trotted up and down the room in imitation of the manner in which old gentlemen walk about the streets; while the Dodger and Charley Bates had to get all these things out of his pockets without being observed. It was so very funny that Oliver laughed till the tears ran down his face.

A few days later, and he understood the full meaning of the game.

The Dodger and Charley Bates had taken Oliver out for a walk, and after sauntering along, they suddenly pulled up short on Clerkenwell Green, at the sight of an old gentleman reading at a bookstall. So intent was he over his book that he might have been sitting in an easy chair in his study.

To Oliver's horror, the Dodger plunged his hand into the gentleman's pocket, drew out a handkerchief, and handed it to Bates. Then both boys ran away round the corner at full speed. Oliver, frightened at what he had seen, ran off, too; the old gentleman, at the same moment missing his handkerchief, and seeing Oliver scudding off, concluded he was the thief, and gave chase, still holding his book in his hand.

The cry of "Stop thief!" was raised. Oliver was knocked down, captured, and taken to the police-station by a constable.

The magistrate was still sitting, and Oliver would have been convicted there and then but for the arrival of the bookseller.

"Stop, stop! Don't take him away! I saw it all! I keep the bookstall," cried the man. "I saw three boys, two others, and the prisoner here. The robbery was committed by another boy. I saw that this one was amazed by it."

Oliver was acquitted. But he had fainted. Mr. Brownlow, for that was the name of the old gentleman, shocked and moved at the boy's deathly whiteness, straightway carried the boy off in a cab to his own house in a quiet, shady street near Pentonville.

III.--Back in Fagin's Den

For many days Oliver remained insensible to the goodness of his new friends. But all that careful nursing could do was done, and he slowly and surely recovered. Mr. Brownlow, a kind-hearted old bachelor, took the greatest interest in his *protégé*, and Oliver implored him not to turn him out of doors to wander in the streets.

"My dear child," said the old gentleman, moved by the warmth of Oliver's appeal, "you need not be afraid of my deserting you. I have been deceived before in people I have endeavored to benefit, but I feel strongly disposed to trust you, nevertheless; and I am more interested in your behalf than I can well account for. Let me hear your story; speak the truth to me, and you shall not be friendless while I am alive."

A certain unmistakable likeness in Oliver to a lady's portrait that was on the wall of the room struck Mr. Brownlow. What connection could there be between the original of the portrait, and this poor child?

But before Mr. Brownlow had heard Oliver's story he had lost the boy. For Fagin, horribly uneasy lest Oliver should be the means of betraying his late companions, resolved to get him back as quickly as possible. To accomplish his evil purpose, Nancy, a young woman who belonged to Fagin's gang, and who had seen Oliver, was prevailed upon to undertake the commission.

Now, the very evening before Oliver was to tell his story to Mr. Brownlow, the boy, anxious to prove his honesty, had set out with some books on an errand to the bookseller at Clerkenwell Green.

"You are to say," said Mr. Brownlow, "that you have brought these books back, and that you have come to pay the four pound ten I owe him. This is a five-pound note, so you will have to bring me back ten shillings change."

"I won't be ten minutes, sir," replied Oliver eagerly.

He was walking briskly along, thinking how happy and contented he ought to feel, when he was startled by a young woman screaming out very loud, "Oh, my dear brother!" He had hardly looked up when he was stopped by having a pair of arms thrown tight round his neck.

"Don't!" cried Oliver, struggling. "Let go of me. Who is it? What are you stopping me for?"

The only reply to this was a great number of loud lamentations from the young woman who had embraced him.

"I've found him! Oh, Oliver, Oliver! Oh, you naughty boy to make me suffer such distress on your account! Come home, dear, come. Oh, I've found him! Thank gracious goodness heavens, I've found him!"

The young woman burst out crying, and a couple of women standing by asked what was the matter.

"Oh, ma'am," replied the young woman, "he ran away from his parents, and went and joined a set of thieves and bad characters, and almost broke his mother's heart."

"Young wretch!" said one woman.

"Go home, do, you little brute," said the other.

"I'm not," replied Oliver, greatly alarmed. "I don't know her. I haven't any sister or father or mother. I'm an orphan; I live at Pentonville."

"Oh, only hear him, how he braves it out," cried the young woman. "Make him come home, or he'll kill his dear mother and father, and break my heart!"

"What the devil's this?" said a man, bursting out of a beer-shop, with a white dog at his heels. "Young Oliver! Come home to your poor mother, you young dog!"

"I don't belong to them. I don't know them! Help, help!" cried Oliver, struggling in the man's powerful grasp.

"Help!" repeated the man. "Yes, I'll help you, you young rascal! What books are these? You've been a-stealin' 'em, have you? Give 'em here!"

With these words the man tore the volumes from his grasp, and struck him on the head.

Weak with recent illness, stupefied by the blows and the suddenness of the attack, terrified by the brutality of the man--who was none other than Bill Sikes, the roughest of all Fagin's pupils--what could one poor child do? Darkness had set in; it was a low neighbourhood; resistance was useless. Sikes and Nancy hurried the boy on between them through courts and alleys till, once more, he was within the dreadful house where the Dodger had first brought him. Long after the gas-lamps were lighted, Mr. Brownlow sat waiting in his parlour. The servant had run up the street twenty times to see if there were

any traces of Oliver. The housekeeper had waited anxiously at the open door. But no Oliver returned.

IV.--Oliver Falls among Friends

Mr. Bill Sikes having an important house-breaking engagement with his fellow-robber, Mr. Toby Crackit, at Shepperton, decided that Oliver must accompany him.

It was a detached house, and the night was dark as pitch when Sikes and Crackit, dragging Oliver along, climbed the wall and approached a narrow, shuttered window. In vain Oliver implored them to let him go.

"Listen, you young limb," whispered Sikes, when a crowbar had overcome the shutter, and the lattice had been opened. "I'm going to put you through there." Drawing a dark lantern from his pocket, he added, "Take this light; go softly up the steps straight afore you, and along the hall to the street door; unfasten it, and let us in."

The boy was put through the window, and Sikes, pointing to the door with his pistol, told him if he faltered he would shoot him.

Hardly had Oliver advanced a few yards before Sikes called out, "Back! back!"

Startled, the boy dropped the lantern, uncertain whether to advance or fly.

The cry was repeated--a light appeared--a vision of two terrified, half-dressed men at the top of the stairs swam before his eyes--a flash--a loud noise--and he staggered back.

Sikes got him out of the window before the smoke cleared away, and fired his pistol after the men, who were already in retreat.

"Clasp your arm tighter," said Sikes. "Give me a shawl here. They've hit him. Quick! The boy is bleeding."

Then came the loud ringing of a bell, and the shouts of men, and the sensation of being carried over uneven ground at a rapid pace. And then the noises grew confused in the distance, and Oliver saw and heard no more.

Sikes, finding the chase too hot, was compelled to leave Oliver in a ditch and make his escape with his friend Crackit.

It was morning when Oliver awoke. His left arm was rudely bandaged in a shawl, and the bandage was saturated with blood. Weak and dizzy, he yet felt that if he remained where he was he would surely die, and so he staggered to his feet. The only house in sight was the one he had entered a few hours earlier, and he bent his steps towards it. He pushed against the garden-gate--it was unlocked. He tottered across the lawn, climbed the steps, knocked faintly at the door, and, his whole strength failing him, sank down against the little portico.

Mr. Giles, the butler and general steward of the house, who had fired the shot and led the pursuit, was just explaining the exciting events of the night to his fellow-servants of the kitchen when Oliver's knock was heard. With considerable reluctance the door was opened, and then the group, peeping timorously over each other's shoulders, beheld no more formidable object than poor little Oliver Twist, speechless and exhausted.

"Here he is!" bawled Giles. "Here's one of the, thieves, ma'am! Wounded, miss! I shot him!"

They lugged the fainting boy into the hall, and then in the midst of all the noise and commotion, there

was heard a sweet and gentle voice, which quelled it in an instant.

"Giles!" whispered the voice from the stairhead. "Hush! You frighten my aunt as much as the thieves did. Is the poor creature much hurt?"

"Wounded desperate, miss," replied Giles.

After a hasty consultation with her aunt, the same gentle speaker bade them carry the wounded person upstairs, and send to Chertsey at all speed for a constable and a doctor. The latter arrived when the young lady and her aunt, Mrs. Maylie, were at breakfast, and his visit to the sick-room changed the state of affairs. On his return he begged Mrs. Maylie and her niece to accompany him upstairs.

In lieu of the dogged, black-visaged ruffian they had expected to see, there lay a mere child, sunk in a deep sleep.

The ladies could not believe this delicate boy was a criminal, and when, on waking up, he told them his simple history, they were determined to prevent his arrest.

The doctor undertook to save the boy, and to that end entered the kitchen where Mr. Giles, Brittles, his assistant, and the constable were regaling themselves with ale.

"How is the patient, sir?" asked Giles.

"So-so," returned the doctor. "I'm afraid you've got yourself into a scrape there, Mr. Giles. Are you a Protestant? And what are *you*?" turning sharply on Brittles.

"Yes, sir; I hope so," faltered Mr. Giles, turning very pale, for the doctor spoke with strange severity.

"I'm the same as Mr. Giles, sir," said Brittles, starting violently.

"Then tell me this, both of you," said the doctor. "Are you going to take upon yourselves to swear that that boy upstairs is the boy that was put through the little window last night? Come, out with it! Pay attention to the reply, constable. Here's a house broken into, and a couple of men catch a moment's glimpse of a boy in the midst of gunpowder-smoke, and in all the distraction of alarm and darkness. Here's a boy comes to that very same house next morning, and because he happens to have his arm tied up, these men lay violent hands upon him, place his life in danger, and swear he is the thief. I ask you again," thundered the doctor, "are you, on your solemn oaths, able to identify that boy?"

Of course, under these circumstances, as Mr. Giles and Brittles couldn't identify the boy, the constable retired, and the attempted robbery was followed by no arrests.

Oliver Twist grew up in the peaceful and happy home of Mrs. Maylie, under the tender affection of two good women. Later on, Mr. Brownlow was found, and Oliver's character restored. It was proved, too, that the portrait Mr. Brownlow possessed was that of Oliver's mother, whom its owner had once esteemed dearly. Betrayed by fate, the unhappy woman had sought refuge in the workhouse, only to die in giving birth to her son.

In that same workhouse, where his authority had formerly been so considerable, Mr. Bumble came--as a pauper--to die.

Tragic was the fate of poor Nancy. Suspected by Fagin of plotting against her accomplices, the Jew so worked on Sikes that the savage housebreaker murdered her.

But neither Fagin nor Sikes escaped.

For the Jew was taken and condemned to death, and in the condemned cell came the recollection to him of all the men he had known who had died upon the scaffold, some of them through his means.

Sikes, when the news of Nancy's murder got abroad, was hunted by a furious crowd. He had taken

refuge in an old, disreputable uninhabited house, known to his accomplices, which stood right over the Thames, in Jacob's Island, not far from Dockhead; but the pursuit was hot, and the only chance of safety lay in getting to the river.

At the very moment when the crowd was forcing its way into the house, Sikes made a running noose to slip beneath his arm-pits, and so lower himself to a ditch beneath. He was out on the roof, and then, when the loop was over his head, the face of the murdered girl seemed to stare at him.

"The eyes again!" he cried, in an unearthly screech, and threw up his arms in horror.

Staggering, as if struck by lightning, he lost his balance and tumbled over the parapet. The noose was on his neck. It ran up with his weight, tight as a bowstring. He fell for five-and-thirty feet, and then, after a sudden jerk, and a terrible convulsion of the limbs, swung lifeless against the wall.

Source:

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