

Oliver Twist Continued

At last, the morning came when Oliver was allowed to go out to work with the two other boys. There had been no handkerchiefs for him to work on for several days and there was not very much to eat for dinner. The three boys set out, but they walked so slowly that Oliver thought they were not going to work at all. Then suddenly the Dodger stopped and put his finger to his lips.

‘What’s the matter?’ demanded Oliver.

‘Be quiet!’ replied the Dodger. ‘Do you see that old man outside the bookshop? He’s the one.’

Oliver looked from the Dodger to Charley Bates with great surprise and confusion, but he had been told not to ask questions. The two boys walked quickly and secretly across the road towards the old gentleman. Oliver followed behind them, watching in silent amazement.

The old gentleman looked quite rich; he wore gold glasses, white trousers, and had an expensive walking stick under his arm. He had picked up a book and was standing there, reading it with great concentration – just as if he were in his own armchair at home. Oliver, his eyes wide with horror and alarm, watched as the Dodger put his hand in the old gentleman’s pocket, took out a handkerchief, and handed it to Charley Bates. Then the two of them ran round the corner as fast as they could.

Suddenly, the whole mystery of the handkerchiefs, and the watches, and the jewels, and Fagin, became clear. Oliver stood for a moment in terror, the blood rushing through him until he felt he was on fire. Then, confused and frightened, he started to run. At the same time, the old gentleman, putting his hand to his pocket and realizing his handkerchief was missing, turned round. He saw Oliver running away, so he naturally thought Oliver was the thief. With loud cries of ‘Stop thief!’, he ran after Oliver with the book still in his hand.

The old gentleman was not the only one who started shouting. The Dodger and Charley Bates, not wanting to attract attention to themselves by running down the street, had stopped round the first corner. When they realized what was happening, they also shouted ‘Stop thief!’ and joined in the chase like good citizens. The cry of ‘Stop thief!’ always causes great excitement. Everybody in the

street stopped what they were doing and began to shout themselves. Many joined in the chase with enthusiasm and soon there was a big crowd running after Oliver.

Finally, they caught the exhausted boy. He fell down on the pavement and the crowd gathered round him. 'Is this the boy?' they asked the old gentleman.

'Yes,' he answered, leaning over Oliver. 'But I'm afraid he's hurt himself.'

'I did that,' said a huge young man proudly. 'And I hurt my hand doing it.'

The old gentleman looked at him with an expression of dislike. Oliver lay on the ground, covered with mud and dust and bleeding from the mouth, and looked wildly at all the faces surrounding him. At that moment a policeman arrived and took Oliver by the collar.

'Come on, get up,' he said roughly.

'It wasn't me, sir,' said Oliver, looking round. 'It was two other boys. They're here somewhere.'

'Oh no, they aren't,' replied the policeman. In fact, he was right, as the Dodger and Charley had quietly disappeared as soon as the crowd had caught Oliver. 'Come on, get up!'

'Don't hurt him,' said the old gentleman.

'I won't,' said the policeman, tearing Oliver's jacket half off his back as he lifted him up. The three of them started walking, followed by the excited crowd.

Oliver was taken to the nearest police station. The officer at the gate looked at the boy. 'Another young thief, eh?' He turned to the old gentleman, 'Are you the person who was robbed, sir?'

'Yes, I am,' replied the old gentleman, 'but I'm not sure that this boy actually took the handkerchief. I don't really want to take him to court.'

'Too late. He must go before the magistrate now.'

Oliver was locked in a small stone cell, which was disgustingly dirty and smelly. As the key turned in the lock, the old gentleman said to himself thoughtfully, 'There's something in that boy's face ... He could be innocent. Where have I seen someone like him before?' After thinking about this for a few minutes, he said, 'No; it must be imagination.' He sighed unhappily, and began reading the book again.

Some time later, the officer touched his shoulder and told him that the court was ready. A magistrate was a judge who dealt with small crimes in local courts, and the magistrate for this district was well known. His name was Mr. Fang and he was a disagreeable, bad-tempered man. Today he was in a particularly bad mood. He frowned angrily at the old gentleman, and asked sharply, 'Who are you?'

'My name, sir, is Brownlow.'

'Officer! What is this man charged with?'

'He's not charged, sir,' answered the officer. 'He's accusing the boy.'

The magistrate looked at Mr. Brownlow from head to foot. 'And what have you got to say?'

Mr. Brownlow began to explain. 'I was standing outside a bookshop —'

'Be quiet, sir!' shouted Mr. Fang. 'Policeman! Now – you arrested the boy. What happened?'

The policeman told the magistrate what he had heard, and how he had searched Oliver afterwards and found nothing. 'Are there any witnesses?' asked the magistrate. 'None,' answered the policeman. Mr. Fang then turned to Mr. Brownlow and angrily told him to describe what had happened.

Mr. Brownlow explained that he had run after the boy only because he saw him running away. He did not think that the boy was the actual thief and he hoped that the boy would not be punished. 'He's been hurt already,' he added, 'and now I'm afraid he's very ill.'

'I don't believe that for a moment,' said Mr. Fang unpleasantly. He turned to Oliver. 'Come now, don't try any clever tricks with me! What's your name?' he demanded.

Oliver tried to reply, but he was too weak to speak. He was deadly pale, and he felt the room spinning round him. At last he managed to whisper a request for water, but the magistrate refused angrily. Suddenly, Oliver fainted and fell to the floor. Mr. Fang stared at him angrily. 'Guilty. Three months' prison,' he said immediately. 'Let him lie there. He'll soon be tired of that.' Mr. Fang stood up. 'This court is now closed.'

At that moment, a man in an old black coat rushed in. 'Stop!' he shouted. 'Don't take the boy away. I saw it all. I'm the bookshop owner.'

Mr. Fang's face was black with anger at this unexpected interruption, but the bookshop owner demanded to be heard. He described exactly what had really happened. He had seen two boys steal the handkerchief and then run away, leaving Oliver to be arrested.

In a final burst of bad temper, Mr. Fang said that his time had been wasted. He announced that Oliver was innocent, and ordered everybody out of the court.

The order was obeyed, and as Mr. Brownlow turned to go down the street, he saw Oliver lying on the pavement, shaking, his face as white as death. 'Poor boy! Poor boy!' said Mr. Brownlow, bending over him. He called a coach quickly, laid Oliver on the seat, and drove away. The coach stopped at a neat house in a quiet, shady street in north London. Oliver was gently carried in to a bed, and received more care and kindness than he had ever had in his life. But he had a fever, and for many days he lay there unconscious.

When he eventually awoke, weak, thin, and pale, he looked anxiously around the room. 'What room is this? Where am I?' he said. 'This is not the place I fell asleep in.'

Mrs. Bedwin, the motherly old housekeeper, heard his words, and instantly came to him. 'Hush – be quiet, my dear, or you'll be ill again. Lie down.'

He lay down, and woke up again much later. After a while, he was able to sit up in a chair, although he was still too weak to walk. In this new position, he could see a picture of a woman hanging on the wall opposite. 'Who is that, madam?' he asked the old housekeeper.

'I don't know, my dear. Do you like it?'

'The eyes look so sad, and they seem to be staring at me. As if the person was alive, and wanted to speak to me but couldn't.'

'You're weak and nervous after your illness,' Mrs. Bedwin said kindly. 'Don't worry about things like that.'

Later that day Mr. Brownlow came in, having heard that the boy was a little better at last. He was delighted to see that Oliver could sit up. But when he saw Oliver's face clearly, Mr. Brownlow stared hard at him.

'I hope you're not angry with me, sir,' said Oliver anxiously.

‘No, no. Not in the least,’ he replied. Then he turned to the housekeeper. ‘But look, Mrs. Bedwin, look there!’ He pointed to the picture of the woman above Oliver’s head and then to the boy’s face. It was a living copy of the picture; even the expression was the same. Oliver did not understand what was happening. He was so alarmed by Mr Brownlow’s excitement that he fainted once more.

.....

Meanwhile, the Dodger and Charley Bates had left the crowd which was chasing Oliver as soon as they could. They went back to their house through the narrow streets, using a complicated route in case anyone was following them. Once they were safely away from other people, Charley Bates rolled on the ground and laughed and laughed. ‘Ha! Ha! Ha! When I saw Oliver running away so fast, round all the corners, bumping into walls ... and all the time I had the handkerchief in my pocket ... Ha! Ha! Ha!’

‘But what’ll Fagin say?’ asked the Dodger. ‘What do you mean?’ The Dodger said nothing more but led Charley Bates into the house and up the stairs.

When Fagin saw them enter, he rose to his feet. ‘Where’s Oliver?’ he asked them furiously. The two boys looked uneasily at each other, but said nothing. Fagin took hold of the Dodger’s collar and shook him violently. ‘Tell me or I’ll kill you!’

The Dodger slid out of his coat in one smooth movement, leaving Fagin holding only the empty coat. ‘The police have got him,’ he said reluctantly. He looked round for a weapon to fight with, but Fagin already had a heavy metal pot in his hand. He threw it hard at the Dodger, but missed and hit Charley Bates, who started to shout with fear. Suddenly, all this noise and confusion was silenced by a deep voice at the door.

‘What the devil’s going on here?’ the voice demanded. The owner of the voice was a big man of about thirty-five in a black coat and very dirty trousers, with a brown hat on his head and a dirty handkerchief around his neck. He also had a three-day-old beard. A white dog with torn ears followed him into the room. The man kicked the dog into a corner and looked round at the signs of battle. ‘Are they trying to murder you, Fagin? I would if I was them. I’d have done it long ago. Now, give me some beer, and don’t poison it.’ It was said as a joke, but if the man

had seen the evil look on Fagin's face, he might have thought the warning was a necessary one.

Fagin produced some beer, and as the fight appeared to be over, everybody sat down. In the conversation that followed, Fagin told the newcomer that Oliver had been caught by the police. 'I'm afraid, Mr Sikes,' he said, 'the boy may say something which will get us into trouble.'

'Very likely,' said Bill Sikes, smiling unkindly. 'You've got problems, Fagin.'

'And I'm afraid,' added Fagin, ignoring Sikes' remark, 'that if we're in trouble, then a lot of other people will be in trouble too, if you understand me, my dear.'

Sikes turned angrily towards the old man. There was a silence. Then Sikes said, 'Somebody must find out what's happened. If he hasn't said anything yet, we must catch him when he leaves the police station.'

Fagin nodded. But there was a difficulty. None of them wanted to go anywhere near a police station. The problem was solved with the arrival of the two young ladies whom Oliver had met one evening in Fagin's house. 'Nancy, my dear,' Fagin said. He smiled sweetly at one of the young ladies. 'Can you go to find out what's happened to Oliver?'

The young lady answered calmly, 'No, I won't.'

'You're the only one here that the police in this district don't know,' said Sikes. 'She'll go, Fagin.'

'No,' repeated Nancy.

'Yes, she will, Fagin.'

Sikes was right. With a mixture of threats and promises, he soon persuaded Nancy to go. She set off at once, and at the police station pretended to be a shy, frightened girl. 'Is my poor little brother Oliver here?' she asked the officer with the keys.

'He's not here,' the officer replied. 'The gentleman's got him.' 'The gentleman? Oh no! What gentleman?' cried Nancy, very upset.

The policeman explained that Oliver had become ill, and the old gentleman had taken him to his house in the Pentonville district of north London.

Nancy, still looking terribly upset, left the station, and hurried back to Fagin's house with this news. As soon as he heard it, Sikes called his white dog, put on his hat and left without saying goodbye to anyone.

'We must find him,' Fagin said urgently to the rest of them. 'No one can stay here – it's too dangerous now. All of you – walk around Pentonville and keep your ears open. Don't come back until you have some news of Oliver! If you can, kidnap him! We've got to keep him quiet before he starts talking about us to his new friends.' With these words, he pushed them all from his room and double-locked the door behind them. Then he took out his hidden box and very carefully hid all the watches and the jewelry beneath his clothes.

Meanwhile

Oliver began to recover and slowly regain his strength at Mr. Brownlow's house. The picture that had caused Mr Brownlow's excitement was taken down from the wall and was not mentioned again. Oliver was disappointed at the disappearance of the picture, since he liked the woman's face, but he had many other things to think about now. They were happy days, while Oliver was getting better. He played cards with Mrs. Bedwin and listened to stories about her family. The days were all so quiet and relaxing, after the hardships and poverty of his previous life. Mr Brownlow bought him a new suit and new shoes, and Oliver's dirty old clothes were given away.

One day Mr. Brownlow asked him to come to his study for a little talk. Oliver went in and sat down. He looked at Mr Brownlow's serious face in alarm. 'Don't tell me you're going to send me away, sir, please!' he exclaimed. 'Let me stay here! I could help with the housework ... please, sir!'

'My dear child, don't be afraid,' said Mr Brownlow kindly. 'I won't desert you. I believe that you're a good boy, not a common thief. You told me you're an orphan – that seems to be the truth. But I want to hear now the whole story of your life, and how you came to be with the boys I saw you with that day.'

Oliver began his story but was soon interrupted by the arrival of Mr. Grimwig, an old friend of Mr. Brownlow's. Mr. Grimwig was a fierce old gentleman and very fond of arguments. He clearly knew all about Oliver and inspected him closely. 'So this is the boy, is it?' he said at last.

Oliver bowed politely and was introduced by Mr. Brownlow. Tea was then brought in, and during the meal Mr. Grimwig stared so hard at Oliver that the boy felt rather confused. Eventually, Mr. Grimwig whispered to Mr. Brownlow, 'He may be a good-looking boy, but I think he's deceiving you, my good friend.'

'Nonsense!' said Mr. Brownlow, becoming angry.

'Well, we'll see,' answered his friend. 'We'll see.'

Later that afternoon, Mr. Brownlow wanted to return some books to a bookseller, and to send some money for new books that he had already collected.

Mr. Grimwig suggested that Oliver should go. 'He'll be sure to deliver everything safely,' he said with a smile.

'Yes, please let me take them,' said Oliver, delighted to be of use.

Mr. Brownlow hesitated, but Mr. Grimwig's smile had annoyed him. 'Very well,' he said. 'Here are the books, Oliver, and a five-pound note. The bookseller will give you ten shillings change.'

'I won't be ten minutes,' replied Oliver eagerly, and he ran out into the street.

'So you expect him to come back, do you?' enquired Mr. Grimwig.

'Yes, I do,' said Mr. Brownlow, smiling confidently. 'Don't you?'

'No. He has a new suit of clothes, some valuable books, and a five-pound note in his pocket. He'll join his old friends - the thieves - and laugh at you. If he comes back, I'll eat my hat.'

The two men sat by the window with a pocket-watch between them, and waited for Oliver's return.

Oliver hurried through the streets to the bookshop, thinking how lucky he was. Suddenly there was a loud scream behind him. 'Oh, my dear brother!' Before he could look round, a pair of arms was thrown tightly around his neck.

‘Don’t!’ he cried, struggling. ‘Let go! Why are you stopping me? Who is it?’

The young woman holding him started to cry loudly. ‘I’ve found him! Oh! Oliver! You naughty boy, to make me suffer so much! Come home immediately, you cruel boy!’ She burst into tears and several people stopped to stare at what was happening.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked one of the watching women.

‘He ran away from his parents a month ago,’ the young woman said. ‘They’re hard-working, respectable people, and he left them to join a gang of thieves and bad characters, and almost broke his mother’s heart.’

‘Go home, you horrible child,’ said another woman.

‘Yes – go back to your parents,’ said a third.

‘But I haven’t got any!’ replied Oliver, greatly alarmed. ‘I haven’t got a sister, either. I’m an orphan. I live in Pentonville.’

‘Listen to him! Make him come home,’ the young woman said to the crowd, ‘or he’ll kill his dear mother and father, and break my heart.’

Suddenly Oliver recognized the woman he had seen in Fagin’s house. ‘It’s Nancy!’ he said, without thinking.

‘You see?’ cried Nancy to the crowd. ‘He knows me!’

Just then a big man ran out of a beer shop, followed by a white dog. ‘What’s this? Young Oliver! Come home to your poor mother, you young devil! And what books are these? You’ve stolen them, haven’t you? Give them to me.’ The man, who was Bill Sikes, seized Oliver with one strong hand and hit him on the head with the other.

‘That’ll do him good!’ shouted some of the crowd. ‘It’s the only way to treat boys like him.’

Bill Sikes held onto Oliver’s arm. ‘Come on, you young thief!’ Still weak from illness, and terrified by the growling dog, Oliver could not resist. He was taken through the dark narrow streets at great speed. Sikes and Nancy gave him no chance to escape, and Oliver had no breath to call out for help. All too quickly, he was back in Fagin’s house, where his old friends were waiting for him.

‘Delighted to see you looking so well, my dear,’ Fagin said, bowing politely. ‘Why didn’t you write, and say you were coming? We’d have got something warm for supper.’ The Dodger and Charley Bates roared with laughter, and the Dodger began looking through the books Oliver had with him.

‘Give them back!’ Oliver cried. ‘Those books belong to the kind old gentleman who took me into his home. Send him back the books and the money – he’ll think I stole them!’

‘You’re right,’ laughed Fagin. ‘He will think that!’

Oliver jumped to his feet and ran wildly from the room, shouting for help. The Dodger and Fagin caught him easily and brought him back. Then the old man picked up a long piece of wood. ‘So you wanted to get away, my dear, did you? Wanted to call the police and get help? We’ll cure you of that.’ He hit Oliver hard on the shoulders with the stick. He was raising it for a second hit when Nancy rushed forward and, seizing the piece of wood, threw it into the fire.

‘I won’t let you do it, Fagin!’ she shouted. ‘You’ve got him again. Isn’t that enough? Now leave him alone.’

Fagin and Sikes looked at each other, shocked by her reaction. ‘You’d better keep quiet, my girl,’ growled Sikes.

‘No, I won’t!’ cried the girl wildly. ‘Now you’ve got the boy, you’ll turn him into a thief and a liar. Isn’t that enough, without killing him too?’ She rushed at Fagin and would have hit him if Sikes had not held her arms so tightly that she couldn’t move. She struggled wildly for a while, then, exhausted, she fainted. Sikes laid her down in the corner, as surprised as Fagin at her anger.

‘She can be really wild when she’s angry,’ Sikes said.

Fagin wiped his forehead. ‘That’s the trouble with women,’ he said, ‘but she’s a clever girl in her work.’

Then Charley Bates and the Dodger took away Oliver’s expensive new suit, gave him some old clothes, and locked him up in a dark room. Oliver felt tired and ill, and was soon fast asleep.

