

## Oliver Twist

### The Robbery

A few days later, a visitor arrived in London from Oliver's home town. He was a large fat man, and very proud of his hat, which showed the world that he was a most important official. It was, in fact, Mr. Bumble the beadle, Oliver's old enemy. Mr. Bumble had completed his business in the city, and had just finished a most satisfactory meal in a pub. He pulled up his chair to the fire, to enjoy his hot gin-and-water in comfort, and opened the newspaper. The first thing he saw was this notice:

*A reward of five pounds is offered for any information leading to the discovery of a young boy, Oliver Twist, who was kidnapped from his home in Pentonville last Thursday evening. I am also very interested in any information about his past.*

There was then a full description of Oliver's clothes and appearance, and Mr. Brownlow's full address. Mr. Bumble rubbed his eyes, read the notice again, and was at the address in less than ten minutes. He was shown into Mr. Brownlow's study, where the old gentleman and his friend Mr. Grimwig were sitting. 'Do you know where the poor boy is now?' Mr. Brownlow asked, when the beadle had explained the reason for his visit. Mr. Bumble shook his head.

'Do you know anything good about him?' asked Mr. Grimwig, looking closely at Mr. Bumble's face. Mr. Bumble shook his head again, very seriously, and turned down the corners of his mouth. 'Then tell us everything you know about him,' said Mr. Brownlow impatiently.

Mr. Bumble put down his hat, unbuttoned his coat, folded his arms, and sat back in his chair. He spoke in his most important and official voice, and talked for twenty minutes. His listeners heard all the details of Oliver's illegitimate birth, and how generously he had been treated as a workhouse orphan. They heard how he had always been an ungrateful and dangerous child, violently attacking another boy, and finally running away from the house where he had been working.

The old gentleman shook his head sadly and gave Mr. Bumble the five pounds. 'I would have been happy to give you three times the amount – if your story had proved that the boy was good.'

If Mr. Bumble had known this earlier, he might have told a different story, but now it was too late; so he took the money and left.

Mr. Brownlow walked up and down his room for several minutes, deep in thought. He rang the bell for Mrs. Bedwin, his housekeeper, and told her what he had heard.

'I don't believe it,' she said, with great certainty.

'I was right,' said Mr. Grimwig with satisfaction. 'You should have listened to what I said.'

Mr. Brownlow said angrily, 'Never let me hear the boy's name again. Never. Remember that, Mrs. Bedwin.'

There were sad hearts at Mr. Brownlow's house that night.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, in another part of London, Oliver remained a prisoner. Fagin had told Oliver how ungrateful he had been to run away. He had told him that he would have died of hunger without Fagin's kindness. He went on to tell Oliver the story of another young boy, who had gone to the police to tell them about the gang, but who had finally been hanged one morning for being a thief. Fagin described the hanging in terrifying detail, and said that he hoped he would never have to tell the police about Oliver – and see Oliver with a rope around his neck.

Oliver felt his blood turn cold.

He remained locked in a room for many days, seeing nobody between early morning and midnight. He spent his time thinking sadly about his friends in Pentonville. After a week, he was free to wander round the house during the day. It was a dirty place, full of rats and insects but no other living thing. All the windows were closed and covered with wood and metal bars that kept out the light.

One afternoon, the Dodger and Charley Bates were at home, and they started telling Oliver about their lives as thieves. 'Why don't you become

one?’ Charley asked him. ‘We all are here – both of us, and Fagin, Sikes, Nancy ... all of us.’

‘I don’t want to be,’ replied Oliver. ‘I wish they’d let me go.’

‘But it’s a good life,’ the Dodger said, taking some coins from his pocket and throwing them up in the air. ‘What does it matter where the money comes from?’ he said, laughing. ‘If you don’t steal it, someone else will. You can be sure of that!’

Fagin entered at this point, with two young men, and joined in the conversation. One of the young men had just come out of prison, and there were many cheerful jokes about his very short hair-cut. Everybody sat around the fire, talking and laughing for hours. Fagin told Oliver how good the Dodger was at his job, and what a friendly boy Charley was. It was, without doubt, an interesting evening for Oliver, after so many days locked up alone.

After that evening, he was rarely on his own again. He spent a lot of time with the Dodger and Charley, and often played the handkerchief game with them. At other times Fagin would tell them all about robberies he had committed in his younger days, telling the stories so well and putting in so many funny details that Oliver could not stop laughing, even though he knew it was wrong. Fagin knew what he was doing. He had made sure that Oliver was *so* lonely and miserable that he would be desperate for any friends, however criminal. Slowly and deliberately, Fagin was trying to poison the young boy’s mind.

One damp cold windy night a few weeks later, Fagin put on his heavy coat and, with the collar pulled up high to hide his face, left his home. He walked fast through the streets, never losing his way even in the darkest places. Finally, he reached an evil, narrow street lit only by a single lamp. He knocked on a door, said something quietly to the person who opened it, then walked upstairs.

Bill Sikes was sitting by his fire with his dog when Fagin entered. The room was a small dark place with almost no furniture. Nancy was there, too, and Fagin glanced at her uneasily. He had not seen her since she had attacked him to stop him hitting Oliver. However, she seemed to have

forgotten all about it, because she told him to pull up a chair and warm himself by the fire.

‘I’m ready for business,’ Bill Sikes said, looking at Fagin suspiciously. ‘Say what you have to say, Fagin.’

‘It’s about the robbery at Chertsey, Bill,’ answered Fagin. ‘Some lovely silver in that house down there!’

‘I know, I know,’ Sikes said. ‘I was down there two nights ago to have a look at the house. But it’s locked like a prison at night, all except one part.’

‘Where’s that?’ asked Fagin, bending his head forwards, his eyes staring excitedly at Sikes.

‘Do you think I’m stupid? I’m not telling you! Anyway, what we need is a boy.’

‘So there’s a small place where only a boy can enter the house?’ asked Fagin.

‘Maybe. But we need a boy.’

There was silence for a time, while Fagin thought. Then he made a sign to Sikes to tell Nancy to leave the room. ‘Don’t worry,’ Sikes said. ‘You can trust her – she won’t talk. Isn’t that right?’

‘Of course it’s right,’ answered the young woman, taking a large drink from the bottle on the table and laughing. ‘Anyway, Fagin, I know your idea is for Oliver to do the job.’

‘You’re a clever girl,’ said Fagin, smiling evilly. ‘That’s exactly what I had in mind. Listen, Bill – the boy’s been training for a few weeks, and it’s time he did some work. He’s the smallest one, anyway.’

‘Is he safe?’ asked Sikes. ‘Because if he tries any tricks on me, I’ll kill him!’

‘He’ll be ours for life, if he feels he’s one of us. And this job will make him feel like that,’ said Fagin eagerly. ‘The boy looks so innocent he’s perfect. And we’ve got to include him in some crime as soon as we can.’

Otherwise, if he escapes now, he can tell the police about us and stay free himself.'

So it was decided that Oliver would help Sikes with the robbery in two days' time. The plan was discussed in great detail and all the arrangements made. By then, Sikes was very drunk, and Fagin got up to leave. As he put on his coat, he stared hard at Nancy, frowning a little... No ... he was sure he could trust her; she was loyal.

The next night, Oliver was alone in Fagin's house when Nancy entered. She was so nervous and white-faced that Oliver asked her if she was ill.

'God forgive me!' she said, beating her hands together. 'I never thought I would do this!'

'Has anything happened?' asked the boy. 'What is it?'

She sat with her back to him, and hid her face with her hands. After a while she said, 'I don't know why I feel so strange sometimes. Come on, Oliver – are you ready? You have to come with me to Bill's house.'

'Why?' 'Oh – nothing important.'

Oliver did not believe her, but he thought that at last this might be an opportunity to escape. So he said, rather too quickly, 'I'm ready.'

Nancy guessed what he was thinking. 'Oliver,' she said, 'this is not the time to escape. I've saved you once, and I will again, but if anything happens tonight, it might mean my death.'

She said this so seriously that Oliver decided it must be true. He was quiet while they walked quickly through the streets to Sikes' house.

Inside his room, Sikes sat Oliver down on a chair. 'Did he come quietly?' he asked Nancy.

'Quiet as a mouse.' 'Glad to hear it,' said Sikes. 'Now listen to me, boy.' He put a gun against Oliver's head. 'If you say one word when you're outside with me, I'll shoot you. Understand?'

Oliver nodded, trying hard not to tremble. Sikes and Oliver started out at five o'clock in the morning, while it was still dark. They crossed from one

side of London to the other. At first, the streets were empty, then shops began to open and people started going to work. Gradually, the noise and traffic increased, and as they passed through the meat market at Smithfield, Oliver was amazed by the sight and smells of so many animals, and by the huge crowds of people, all pushing and swearing and shouting. But Bill Sikes marched on without stopping.

Later in the day they were given a lift in a horse and cart from west London out into the country. Night fell, and after walking a few more miles down country roads, they finally arrived at an old house standing alone by a river. It was dark and seemed to be empty. They went inside without knocking. Inside were two other men, who, at Sikes' command, produced food and drink for him and the boy. Then Sikes told Oliver to get some sleep as they would be going out again later that night. Oliver still had no idea of the purpose of this expedition, but his head ached with tiredness and he soon fell asleep.

At half past one the men got up and checked their equipment, gathering several sticks as well. Sikes and the man called Toby left the house together, with Oliver walking between them. There was now a thick fog, and the night was very still as they hurried through the deserted streets of the nearby town. Out in the country again, they walked down several small roads until finally they stopped at a house surrounded by a high wall. As quick as lightning, Toby climbed up and pulled Oliver after him. Inside the garden, they crept towards the house; and now, for the first time, Oliver realized in horror that the purpose of the expedition was robbery, and maybe even murder.

Bill Sikes broke open a small window at the back of the house, then shone his light into Oliver's face. 'Now listen. I'm going to put you through here. Go straight through into the hall and on to the front door, and let us in. And if you don't, you can be sure I'll shoot you.'

Oliver, stupid with terror, was lifted through the window into the house. Desperately, he decided to try to run upstairs and warn the family. He began to creep forwards. Suddenly, there was a loud noise from the hall. 'Come back!' shouted Sikes. 'Back! Back!'

Oliver stood still, frozen with fear. A light appeared, then two men on the stairs, then a sudden bright flash, and a loud bang. Oliver staggered back.

Sikes seized the boy's collar through the window and pulled him back out into the garden. 'They've hit him!' shouted Sikes. 'He's bleeding.' A bell rang loudly, above the noise of more gunshots and the shouts of men. Oliver felt himself being carried across rough ground, and then he saw and heard no more.