

A Failed Robbery, an Injured Boy, and a Desperate Girl

The bullet that hit Oliver ripped through his arm – not quite fatally. Sikes and Toby pulled him out and ran for it, with Brownlow’s dogs hot on their trail. Running down in the darkness by the river, Sikes, Toby, and the helpless Oliver finally outpaced their pursuers in the dark. But the darkness held traps, and Sikes fell into one such.

While the terrible events of Oliver’s shooting were unfolding at the scene of the crime, the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates were playing cards in Fagin’s house. The Artful Dodger, as usual, was winning easily; somehow, he always seemed to know exactly what cards the other players had in their hands. Suddenly there was a faint ring on the bell downstairs, and Toby came in – the man who had gone with Bill Sikes and Oliver to rob the house in Chertsey. He was carrying the wounded Oliver, whose arm was ripped by gunshot.

Fagin jumped to his feet. ‘Where’s Bill?’ he yelled. ‘Sikes! Where is he hiding?’

‘We failed,’ said the robber.

‘What happened?’

‘We got the boy into the house. An old man woke up and came out to the stairs with a gun. Bill shot. He shot. The boy was hit. We ran away with Oliver between us, and they chased us with dogs.’ ‘His arm was hit, his head was hanging down, and he was cold. We needed to go faster, but Bill tripped and fell into the river as we ran. I guess old Bill swam home – if he didn’t drown.’

Fagin did not wait to hear any more. He gave an angry cry, ran out of the house, and hurried through the streets until he reached Nancy’s house. As he climbed the stairs, he thought, *Well, Nancy, if there’s anything going on here, I’ll find out about it – however clever you are.*

Nancy was alone upstairs in the room, her head on the table. ‘She’s been drinking again,’ thought Fagin. As he closed the door, she woke up. He

told her what had happened during the robbery; she said nothing and her head returned to the table. ‘And where do you think the boy is now, my dear?’ Fagin asked her, trying hard to see her face. ‘Poor little child! Hurt like that.’

Nancy looked up. ‘I hope the child’s dead. Then he’d be happier than any of us.’

‘You’re drunk.’ Fagin suddenly lost his temper. ‘The boy’s worth a fortune to me – and now we have him – if he doesn’t die. Come with me and we’ll go see if Bill is alive.’ Fagin took Nancy out into the blackness of the night and walked to Sikes’ place.

Sikes lay on his bed, shivering with a fever. ‘It was badly planned,’ Fagin told Sikes angrily. ‘The boy wasn’t up to it – that kind of violent robbery. I coulda made the boy into an ordinary pickpocket. But you had to use for ya stupid plans.’

‘Go to Hell,’ said Sikes.

‘He isn’t like the other boys here,’ Fagin said. ‘We can’t afford to do that kind of thing,’ said Fagin. ‘But I can turn the boy into an ordinary thief now. So let me be!’”

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The fall into the river had chilled Bill Sikes to the bone. He crawled into bed for a week, shivering with fever. He could only wait for word from Fagin about Toby and Oliver. But on an evening a week after the terrible little business, Bill Sikes, waking from his feverous sleep, called out to no one in particular, asking the time. The room he was lying in was very small and dirty – in this poorest part of London. There were so few possessions or comforts in the room that it was clear Mr. Sikes had met hard times. He himself was thin and pale from illness, and was lying on the bed, wrapped in an old coat. The white dog lay on the floor next to him.

Seated by the window was Nancy, repairing Sikes’ old jacket. She, too, was thin and pale. At Sikes’ voice she raised her head from her work. ‘Not long past seven,’ she said. ‘How do you feel now, Bill?’

‘As weak as water. Help me get up, will you?’

As Nancy helped him out of bed, Sikes swore and cursed at her clumsiness. Illness had not improved his temper.

‘You wouldn’t speak like that if you knew how kindly I’ve nursed you these last few days,’ said Nancy. ‘So many nights, I’ve looked after you.’ She sat down in a chair, exhausted.

‘Get up!’ shouted Sikes. ‘What’s wrong with you?’

But Nancy was unable to get up. Too much drink and too much guilt had exhausted her. Her head fell back against the chair and she fainted. Sikes swore and cursed again, but Nancy remained unconscious.

‘What’s the matter here?’ asked a voice from the door, and Fagin, followed by the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates, entered the room. When they saw Nancy, they hurried to help her. Charley rubbed her hands and the Dodger gave her a drink from the bottle he carried. Gradually, Nancy recovered her senses.

Sikes then turned to Fagin. ‘What are you here for?’ he asked roughly. ‘You haven’t been here when I needed you – all the time I was ill. I haven’t two coins to rub together. Why didn’t you help me? You treat me worse than a dog!’

‘Don’t be bad-tempered, my dear,’ said Fagin calmly. ‘I haven’t forgotten you, Bill.’

‘Well, what about some money, then? I’ve done enough work for you recently – what about some money?’

‘I haven’t a single coin with me, my dear,’ said Fagin.

‘Then go and get some – you’ve got lots at home. No, I don’t trust you. Nancy can go back with you to your house and fetch some money. I’ll stay here and sleep.’

After a good deal of arguing, Fagin managed to reduce the amount Sikes was demanding from five pounds to three pounds. He went back to his house with Nancy and the boys. When they were inside, Fagin told the girl, ‘I’ll just go upstairs and fetch the cash for Bill, my dear. There’s little money

in this business, Nancy, little money and no thanks – but I'm fond of seeing the young people around me.'

'How pale you are, Nancy!' said Fagin. 'What have you been doing to yourself?'

'Nothing – except waiting here for you too long,' she answered, turning her face away from him. 'Now, where's the money for Bill?'

With a sigh for every piece of money, Fagin put the agreed amount into her hand. And then he turned his attention to nursing Oliver's wounded arm.

When Nancy was out in the street again, she sat down on a doorstep, and for a few minutes seemed unable to move. Then she started running wildly through the streets, and when she was exhausted she stopped and burst into tears. Thoughts of Oliver's fate haunted her. Suddenly, this strange mood seemed to leave her, and she turned and hurried back to Sikes' house.

At first when she returned, Sikes noticed nothing unusual about her. Fagin, with his sharp, suspicious eyes, would have noticed something at once. But as night came, the girl's nervous excitement increased and even Sikes was alarmed by the paleness in her cheeks and the fire in her eye. He lay in bed, drinking hot gin-and-water, and staring at her.

'You look like a corpse that's come back to life again. What's the matter with you tonight?'

'Nothing. Why are you staring at me so hard?'

'Either you've caught the fever yourself, or – no, you're not going to ... you wouldn't do that!'

'Do what?' asked the girl. 'There's not a girl alive as loyal as you. If you weren't, I'd have cut your throat months ago. No, you must have the fever coming on, that's it. Now, give me some of my medicine.'

Nancy quickly poured out his medicine with her back to him. He took it, and after turning restlessly for some time, he eventually fell into a deep, heavy sleep.

The drug's taken effect at last, Nancy said to herself as she rose from her position beside the bed. 'I hope I'm not too late.'

Quickly, she put on her coat and hat, looking round fearfully as if she expected at any moment to feel Sikes' heavy hand on her shoulder. She kissed the robber's lips softly, then ran from the house without a sound. She hurried in the direction of west London, pushing past people on the pavement, and running across crowded streets without looking.

She came to a wealthier part of the town where the streets were quieter, and before long she had reached her destination. It was a family house in a quiet street near Hyde Park. The clock struck eleven as she entered.

The woman at the door looked at her and asked, 'What do you want here?'

'I want to see Mister Brownlow.'

The woman looked at Nancy with strong disapproval. 'He won't want to see someone like you. Come on, get out.'

'Let me see him – or two of you will have to throw me out!' said Nancy violently. "I know about Oliver."

The Mrs. Bedwin looked at her again and decided it would be easier to do as she asked. He led her upstairs to Brownlow's sitting room.

Nancy entered with a brave face but with fear in her heart. 'Please sit down and tell me why you wish to see me,' said Mr. Brownlow.

I am about to put my life, and the lives of others, in your hands. I am the girl that kidnapped little Oliver and took him back to old Fagin's house on the night Oliver was going to the bookseller.'

'You!'

'Yes, it was me. I am that wicked creature you have heard about. I've no friends except thieves and robbers. I've lived on the streets since I was a child, cold, hungry, among people who are always drunk and fighting. And that's where I'll die, too.'

'I pity you!' said Brownlow in a broken voice.

‘But I’ll tell you why I’m here. I think that Oliver’s life is in danger.’

‘Why? How?’

‘Bill Sikes said he could have Oliver killed because suspicion about the robbery might otherwise point to himself. So he’ll try for the rest of his life to put blame on the boy if he can. Those were his words,’ said Nancy, looking round uneasily, as if she still expected to see Sikes. ‘His voice was full of anger and hatred. I know many people who do worse things, but I’d rather listen to all of them than to this man talk about hurting Oliver... but I must get back now, or people will wonder where I’ve been.’

‘Back! How can you go back to such a life?’ asked Mr. Brownlow. ‘You’ve told me all this. Now I can help you by letting you stay somewhere safe.’

‘No. Perhaps it’s hard for you to believe, but there’s one man, the most dangerous of them all, that I can never leave. You’re the first person who’s ever spoken to me so kindly – but it’s too late.’

‘It’s never too late!’

‘It is!’ cried the girl. ‘I can’t leave him now. And if I tell anyone about my man, he’ll die. And for some stupid reason, I still love that cursed Bill Sikes.’

‘But how can I find you again, when we want to investigate this mystery further?’

‘I’ll meet you secretly, if you promise not to watch or follow me,’ said Nancy. ‘And if you promise just one more thing – not to do anything to hurt the man I can never leave.’

‘I promise.,’ said Brownlow.

‘Every Sunday night, between eleven and twelve, I will walk on London Bridge. Meet me there if you want more information.’

As Nancy said these words, she left the room and ran down the stairs and out into the street once more. Brownlow was left alone, his thoughts in great confusion as he wondered desperately what to do.

II

Although experience had made Nancy an expert liar, she could not completely hide the fear in her mind. She knew she had taken an enormous risk in going to see Mr. Brownlow. If Fagin or Sikes ever found out ... But she pushed these fears away. She was determined to keep her promise to meet him as arranged. On the first Sunday night after her meeting with Brownlow, she was in Sikes' room when the clock struck eleven. Fagin was there, too, discussing some business with Sikes. Nancy stood up and put on her coat. Sikes watched her, surprised.

‘Nancy! Where are you going at this time of night?’

‘Not far.’

‘What kind of answer is that? Where are you going?’

‘I don't know,’ replied the girl.

‘Then *I* do. Nowhere. Sit down.’

‘I'm not well. I want a breath of air.’

Sikes got up and locked the door.

‘Let me go!’ said the girl with great force. ‘Just for one hour – let me go!’

Sikes seized her arms roughly. ‘The girl's gone mad!’

Nancy fought wildly, and Sikes had to hold her down in a chair. She continued to scream and fight until midnight, when, exhausted and tearful, she stopped struggling. She went into another room and threw herself on a bed.

‘She's a strange girl,’ Sikes said to Fagin, shaking his head. ‘Why did she suddenly decide to go out tonight? I thought that after all these years I'd finally tamed her. She must be ill – perhaps she's still got a bit of fever.’

‘That must be it,’ said Fagin, nodding thoughtfully.

As he walked home, Fagin's eyes were sharp with suspicion. He had suspected for a while that Nancy had become tired of Bill Sikes' brutality

and violence, and that she had found a new friend to take his place. Her manner was different; she often left home alone, and she seemed less interested in the gang. And tonight, her desperate impatience to go out at a particular hour ... He was certain he was right.

Fagin began to make plans. Fagin, too, had become tired of Sikes. Sikes knew too much – too many dangerous secrets about Fagin himself. Fagin distrusted everybody, but he hated and distrusted Sikes most of all. It would be very convenient if Sikes could be ... removed. With a little persuasion, Fagin thought, perhaps the girl would poison Sikes. Suddenly, his eyes narrowed in delight. *Yes! First, I must have her watched, and find out who her new man is. Then I shall threaten to tell Sikes everything. She knows that neither she nor her new man will ever be safe from Sikes' violent jealousy. She will have no choice except to do as I ask her – and then, once the murder is done, she will be in my power for- ever!*

Early next morning Fagin called the most trusted member of his gang the Artful Dodger. 'I have another job for you now,' Fagin told him. 'It needs great care and secrecy. I want you to follow Nancy. I want to know where she goes, who she sees, and if possible, what she says. I will pay you a pound for this information.'

Jack's eyes were wide with greed. 'I'm the right man for this job. 'But why? You don't trust her, then?'

'Exactly so, my dear. Exactly so,' smiled Fagin.

The following Sunday, soon after eleven o'clock, a woman walked quickly through the dark streets towards London Bridge. A mist hung over the river, and the buildings on the far bank could hardly be seen. A young man followed some distance behind her, keeping to the darkest shadows. It was a cold, damp night, and there were very few people on the streets at this late hour. When the woman reached the center of the bridge, she stopped and looked around anxiously. The man following her stopped too. The heavy bell of St Paul's cathedral rang out, announcing the death of another day. Just as it finished, a grey-haired man got out of a coach and walked across the bridge. He met the woman, who took him down some steps leading to the river bank. They stood in deep shadow by the wall of the bridge. The you Dodger hurried down some other steps, crept up to the corner of the wall, and listened to their talk.

Nancy spoke first. ‘I’m so frightened tonight I can hardly breathe.’

‘Frightened of what?’ asked Mr. Brownlow. He seemed to pity her.

‘I wish I knew. Horrible thoughts of death, and blood, have been with me all day. I don’t know why. I couldn’t come last Sunday,’ continued the girl. ‘I was kept in by force. But tonight Bill Sikes will be out all night until daylight. Now, before I tell you anything else, I must tell you that I don’t want Fagin, or any of the other members of the gang, to be handed to the police.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I couldn’t betray them. They’ve been loyal to me, and I’ll stay loyal to them.’

‘Then just tell us how we can get the boy safe, and I promise none of your friends will be harmed,’ said Mr. Brownlow.

‘And he’ll never know how you found out about him?’ she asked.

‘I promise,’ said Brownlow gently.

Nancy then told them, in so low a voice that the listener round the corner could hardly hear her, where Monks often went for a drink, and what he looked like. She finished by saying, ‘On his throat, high up, there is —’

‘A bright red mark?’ asked Mr. Brownlow.

‘Do you know him?’ asked Nancy in surprise.

‘I think I do.’ Mr. Brownlow murmured to himself, ‘It must be him!’

Then more loudly, he said to Nancy, ‘Thank you for everything you’ve told us. But now – how can you go back to these people? Come with us now, tonight. We can arrange for you to be hidden from them all forever, if you want us to.’

The girl shook her head. ‘I’m chained to them, bad as they are. I’ve gone too far to change my life now.’ She looked nervously over her shoulder. ‘I can feel those dreadful terrors again – visions of blood and death. I must go home.’

Mr. Brownlow and Rose could not persuade her to change her mind. Sadly, they turned to leave, and when they had gone, Nancy fell to the ground in a storm of tears.

Meanwhile, the Artful Dodger, amazed by all that he had heard, crept up the steps and ran for Fagin's house as fast as his legs could carry him.

Some time later, nearly two hours before dawn, Jack the Dodger told his fateful story to Fagin – how Nancy had talked to the old man. Fagin sat silently by a dead fire, staring at the flame of a candle on the table beside him. With his pale, wrinkled face and his red, staring eyes, he looked like a devil out of hell. Hatred ran like poison through his every thought. Hatred for the girl who had dared to talk to strangers, who had ruined his plan. He did not believe her promise not to betray him, and he feared that he would now be caught, and hanged.

Just before dawn Bill Sikes entered the room, carrying a bundle which contained the results of his night's work. Fagin took what Sikes gave him, then stared at the robber for a long time without speaking.

'Why are you looking at me like that?' asked Sikes, uneasy at the old man's strange expression.

Fagin raised his hand, but his passion was so great that he could not speak.

'Say something, will you!' shouted Sikes, placing his huge hand on Fagin's collar and shaking him in his anger and fear. 'Open your mouth and say what you've got to say!'

Eventually Fagin found his voice. 'Bill, what would you do if one of the gang went out at night and told someone all about us, and what we'd done? What would you do to him?'

'I'd smash his head into little pieces,' said the robber, swearing violently.

'And what if it was me, who knows so much about all of us, and could put us all in prison and get us all hanged?' whispered Fagin, his eyes flashing with hate.

‘I’d beat your brains out in public. Even in the law-court, I’d run over and kill you with my bare hands,’ said Sikes, showing his teeth in his anger. ‘I don’t care who it was, that’s what I’d do.’

Fagin woke Jack Dawkins, the Dodger.

‘Tell Bill what you told me, what you saw, what she did. Tell him!’

Jack rubbed the sleep from his eyes and told Sikes everything. His face white with passion, Sikes listened to the end, then, swearing furiously, he rushed from the room and down the stairs.

‘Bill!’ Fagin called after him. ‘You won’t be ... too violent?’

Sikes made no reply, but, pulling open the door, ran out into the silent streets. He did not turn his head to right or left, but looked straight in front of him with wild determination. He ran at great speed, his eyes on fire, his teeth tight together, and did not pause until he reached his own door. He ran up to his room, entered and locked the door, put a table against it, then woke Nancy.

‘Bill!’ she said, pleased to see him. But when she saw his expression, the color went out of her face. ‘What’s the matter?’ she said in alarm.

‘You know what. You talked!’

Nancy gasped.

Sikes took out his gun, but realizing, even in his madness, that a shot might be heard, he beat her twice across the face with it as hard as he could.

She fell, with a low cry of pain and terror, almost blinded by the blood that flowed from the cut on her forehead. The murderer staggered to a corner, seized a heavy stick, stepped forth and struck down Nancy, killing the woman who was foolish enough to have loved him.