

Oliver Twist

By Charles Dickens

Chapter I

Oliver Twist was born in a workhouse, and when he arrived in this hard world, it was very doubtful whether he would live beyond the first three minutes. He lay on a hard little bed and struggled to start breathing. Oliver fought his first battle without much assistance from the two people present at his birth. One was an old woman, who was nearly always drunk, and the other was a busy local doctor, who was not paid enough to be very interested in Oliver's survival. After all, death was a common event in the workhouse, where only the poor and homeless lived. However, Oliver managed to draw his first breath, and then announced his arrival to the rest of the workhouse by crying loudly.

His mother raised her pale young face from the pillow and whispered, 'Let me see the child, and die.'

The doctor turned away from the fire, where he had been warming his hands. 'You must not talk about dying yet,' he said to her kindly. He gave her the child to hold.

Lovingly, she kissed the baby on its forehead with her cold white lips, then stared wildly around the room, fell back – and died.

'Poor dear!' said the nurse, hurriedly putting a green glass bottle back in the pocket of her long skirt.

The doctor began to put on his coat. 'The baby is weak and will probably have difficulties,' he said. 'If so, give it a little milk to keep

it quiet.’ Then he looked at the dead woman. ‘The mother was a good-looking girl. Where did she come from?’

‘She was brought here last night,’ replied the old woman. ‘She was found lying in the street. She’d walked some distance – judging by her shoes, which were worn to pieces. Where she came from, where she was going, or what her name was, nobody knows.’

The doctor lifted the girl’s left hand. ‘The old story,’ he said sadly, shaking his head. ‘No wedding ring, I see. Ah! Good night.’

And so Oliver was left with only the drunken nurse. Without clothes, under his first blanket, he could have been the child of a king or a beggar. But when the woman dressed him later in rough cotton clothes, yellow with age, he looked exactly what he was – an orphan in a workhouse, ready for a life of misery, hunger, and neglect. Oliver cried loudly. If he could have known that he was a workhouse orphan, perhaps he would have cried even more loudly.

There was no one to look after the baby in the workhouse, so Oliver was sent to a special ‘baby farm’ nearby. There, he and thirty other children rolled around the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing. Mrs Mann, the old woman who ‘looked after’ them, was very experienced. She knew what was good for children, and a full stomach was very dangerous to their health. She also knew what was good for herself, so she kept for her own use the money that she was given for the children’s food.

The board responsible for the orphans sometimes checked on the health of the children, but they always sent the beadle, a kind of local policeman, to announce their visit the day before. So whenever the board arrived, of course, the children were always neat and clean.

This was the way Oliver was brought up. Consequently, at the age of nine he was a pale, thin child, and short for his age. But despite frequent beatings by Mrs Mann, his spirit was strong, which was probably the reason why he managed to reach the age of nine at all.

On Oliver's ninth birthday, Mr Bumble the beadle came to the house to see Mrs Mann. Through the front window Mrs Mann saw him at the gate, and turned quickly to the girl who worked with her. 'Quick! Take Oliver and those others upstairs to be washed!' she said. Then she ran out to unlock the gate. (It was always kept locked to prevent official visitors walking in unexpectedly.)

'I have business to talk about,' Mr Bumble told Mrs Mann as he entered the house. He was a big fat man, often bad-tempered, and was full of self-importance. He did not like to be kept waiting at a locked gate.

Mrs Mann took his hat and coat, placed a chair for him, and expressed great concern for his comfort. 'You've had a long walk, Mr Bumble,' she said, 'and you must be thirsty.' She took out a bottle from the cupboard.

'No, thank you, Mrs Mann. Not a drop.' He waved the bottle away.

'Just a little drop, Mr Bumble, with cold water,' said Mrs Mann persuasively. Mr Bumble coughed. 'What is it?' he asked, looking at the bottle with interest.

'Gin. I keep it for the children's medicine drink.'

‘You give the children gin, Mrs Mann?’ asked Mr Bumble, watching as she mixed his drink.

‘Only with medicine, sir. I don’t like to see them suffer.’

‘You’re a good woman, Mrs Mann.’ Mr Bumble drank half his glass immediately. ‘I’ll tell the board about you. Now – the reason why I’m here: Oliver Twist is nine years old today. We’ve never been able to discover anything about his parents.’

‘Then how did he get his name?’

‘I gave it to him,’ said Mr Bumble proudly. ‘We follow the alphabet. The last one was an S – Swubble. Then it was T, so this one is Twist. The next one will be Unwin. Anyway, Oliver Twist is now old enough to return to the workhouse. Bring him here, please.’

While Mrs Mann went to get him, Mr Bumble finished the rest of his gin. Oliver, his face and hands now almost clean, was led into the room. ‘Will you come along with me, Oliver?’ asked Mr Bumble in a loud voice.

Oliver was very glad to be free of Mrs Mann’s violence, but he said nothing because she was angrily shaking her finger at him. However, as the gate closed behind Oliver, he burst into tears. He was leaving behind the other children, the only friends he had, and he realized at that moment how lonely he was in the world.

Mr Bumble walked on with long steps, with Oliver on his short little legs running beside him. The feeling of contentment produced by gin-and-water had now disappeared, and the beadle was in a bad mood once more.

Back at the workhouse, Oliver was taken to see the board. He stood in front of ten fat men who were sitting around a table. ‘What’s your name, boy?’ asked a particularly fat man with a very round, red face. Oliver was frightened at the sight of so many people, and started to cry. ‘Why are you crying?’ The beadle hit him on the back, and so naturally Oliver cried even more.

‘The boy is a fool,’ one member of the board announced.

‘You know you have no father or mother,’ said the first man, ‘and that you have been brought up with other orphans?’

‘Yes, sir,’ replied Oliver, crying bitterly.

‘Why is the boy crying?’ repeated the other man, puzzled.

‘You have come here to be educated,’ continued the fat man, ‘so you will start working here tomorrow at six o’clock.’ Oliver was led away to a large room, where, on a rough hard bed, he cried himself to sleep.

The room in the workhouse where the boys were fed was a large stone hall, and at one end the master and two women served the food. This consisted of a bowl of thin soup three times a day, with a piece of bread on Sundays. The boys ate everything and were always hungry. The bowls never needed washing. The boys polished them with their spoons until they shone. After three months of this slow starvation, one of the boys told the others he was so hungry that one night he might eat the boy who slept next to him. He had a wild hungry eye, and the other boys believed him. After a long discussion,

they decided that one of them should ask for more food after supper that evening, and Oliver was chosen.

The evening arrived; the soup was served, and the bowls were empty again in a few seconds. Oliver went up to the master, with his bowl in his hand. He felt very frightened, but also desperate with hunger. 'Please, sir, I want some more.'

The master was a fat, healthy man, but he turned very pale. He looked at the little boy in front of him with amazement. Nobody else spoke. 'What?' he asked at last, in a faint voice.

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

The master hit him with the serving spoon, then seized Oliver's arms and shouted for the beadle. The beadle came quickly, heard the dreadful news, and immediately ran to tell the board. 'He asked for more?' Mr Limbkins, the fattest board member, asked in horror. 'Bumble – is this really true?'

'That boy will be hanged!' said the man who earlier had called Oliver a fool. 'You see if I'm not right.'

Oliver was led away to be locked up, and a reward was offered to anybody who would take him away and use him for work.

Chapter 2

Oliver's First Job

Oliver stayed a prisoner alone in the dark room for a week. He cried bitterly all day, and when the long night came, he spread his little hands over his eyes to shut out the darkness, and tried to sleep.

He was given freezing water to wash with, and was beaten daily by Mr Bumble in front of all the other boys in the hall, as a warning to them.

One day Mr Bumble met the local undertaker, Mr Sowerberry, outside the workhouse. ‘Do you know anybody who wants to train a boy for work, Mr Sowerberry?’ Mr Bumble pointed at the notice on the wall above him, which offered five pounds to anybody who would take Oliver Twist for work.

Mr Sowerberry rubbed his chin and thought for a while. ‘I pay enough for the poor with my taxes,’ he said, ‘so why shouldn’t I be able to make use of them in my work? Yes, I’ll take the boy myself.’

And so the board agreed to send Oliver to work for the undertaker. The necessary papers were signed. Oliver’s small possessions were put into a brown paper parcel, and he was led to Mr Sowerberry’s house by Mr Bumble. As they walked along, tears began to run down Oliver’s face.

‘What is it this time?’ asked Mr Bumble impatiently. ‘Don’t be so ungrateful. This gentleman is going to look after you.’

‘It’s just that I’m so lonely, sir!’ said the child. ‘Everybody hates me. Please don’t be angry with me, sir!’ Even Mr Bumble felt a little pity. He coughed, told Oliver to dry his eyes and be a good boy, and walked on with him in silence.

The undertaker had just finished work for the day when Mr Bumble entered his shop. ‘Here, I’ve brought the boy,’ said the beadle.

Oliver bowed to the undertaker, who raised his candle to get a better view of the boy. ‘Mrs Sowerberry,’ he called, ‘come and have a look.’

His wife, a short, thin woman with a disagreeable face, came out to see. ‘He’s very small,’ she said immediately.

‘He is,’ agreed Mr Bumble, ‘but he’ll grow, Mrs Sowerberry.’

‘Yes,’ she said crossly, ‘when he eats our food. Go on, get downstairs.’ She pushed Oliver downstairs into a damp, dark kitchen, and called to the girl working down there. ‘Here, Charlotte, give this boy some meat that the dog left – if he thinks it’s good enough for him.’

Oliver tore the meat to pieces with his teeth as if he were a wild animal. Mrs Sowerberry watched him in silent horror, already thinking about her future food bills, then took him upstairs to the shop. ‘You’ll sleep here, among the coffins,’ she said.

Oliver stared around the dark, airless shop at the coffins, some finished, some only half-made. He trembled at the thought of ghosts. His bed was a small hole in the floor, and looked very like a grave. But it was not only the room that depressed Oliver. He felt very lonely, with no friends and no one to care for him. As he lay on the bed, he found himself wishing that it really was his grave.

The next morning he was woken up by someone kicking at the shop door. 'Open the door, will you?' shouted a voice through the keyhole.

'Yes, sir.' 'I suppose you're the new boy,' said the voice through the keyhole. 'How old are you?'

'Ten, sir.' 'Then I'll hit you when I get in,' said the voice.

Oliver was experienced enough to know that the promise was probably true. He opened the door with a shaking hand, then looked up and down the street. All he could see was a large boy wearing the uniform of one of the charity schools, where the children of the very poor used to go. 'Did you want a coffin?' asked Oliver, innocently.

The charity-boy looked at him fiercely. 'You'll be needing a coffin soon, Workhouse, if you make jokes like that! I'm Mister Noah Claypole, and you're working under me. Now, hurry up and open the curtains!' As he said this, he kicked Oliver and entered the shop. He was a big, clumsy boy of about fourteen, with a large head and very small eyes. Added to these attractions were a red nose and dirty yellow trousers.

The boys went down to breakfast, which the girl Charlotte had made for them. She gave an extra piece of meat to Noah, then told Oliver to hurry up as it was his job to look after the shop.

'Did you hear that, Workhouse?' shouted Noah.

‘He heard, Noah,’ said Charlotte. ‘Leave him alone.’
‘Why?’ asked Noah. ‘All his relations have already left him alone. His mother and father aren’t going to interfere with him!’
Charlotte and Noah both started laughing loudly.

Oliver sat alone in the corner, eating old bits of bread. Noah was a charity-boy, but not a workhouse orphan; he at least knew who his parents were. But for a long time all the local shop-boys had insulted him because he wore the uniform of a charity-boy. Now fortune had brought him a creature in an even lower position in society than himself. Noah intended to repay to Oliver every insult he had ever received, and to make the new boy’s life a misery.

After a few weeks, Mr Sowerberry decided that he liked Oliver’s appearance enough to train him in the undertaking business. Oliver’s permanent expression of sadness was very suitable, the undertaker thought, for collecting dead bodies from houses and accompanying the coffins to funerals.

One day, Mr Bumble came to tell them about a woman who had died in an extremely poor part of the town, and Sowerberry and Oliver went to collect the body. They went down dirty narrow streets where the houses on either side were tall and large, but very old. Some of the houses were almost falling down, and had to be supported by huge blocks of wood. The area was so poor that even the dead rats in the street looked as though they had died of hunger. They found the right house, and climbed the dark stairs to a miserable little room. Some children watched them from the shadows as they entered. Something lay beneath a blanket on the floor in one corner. A man and an old woman stood near the body. Oliver was afraid

to look at them. With their thin faces and sharp teeth, they looked like the rats he had seen outside.

As Sowerberry began to measure the body for a coffin, the man knelt on the floor and cried out, ‘She starved to death, I tell you! That’s why she died!’ He fell to the floor, and all the children behind him started to cry.

Sowerberry and Oliver, their work done, left as fast as they could. They returned the next day with the coffin and four men from the workhouse who were to carry it.

The man and the old woman followed the coffin to the church, and waited silently by the grave for the priest to arrive. When at last he came, he hurried through the burial prayers, and as quickly as possible (it was only a job, after all) the coffin was put into the ground. At this point the husband, who had not moved once during his wife’s burial – not even during the long wait for the priest – suddenly fainted to the ground and had to have cold water thrown over him. ‘So how did you like it, Oliver?’ asked Sowerberry later, as they walked home.

‘Not very much, sir,’ Oliver answered truthfully.

‘You’ll get used to it, my boy.’

Oliver wondered how long that would take, and remained silent all the way back to the shop, thinking about everything that he had seen and heard.

Chapter 3

Oliver Goes to London

Oliver was now officially an undertaker's assistant. It was a good, sickly time of year, and coffins were selling well. Oliver gained a lot of experience in a short time, and was interested to see how brave some people were after a death in the family. During funerals for some rich people, for example, he saw that the people who had cried the loudest in church usually recovered the fastest afterwards. He noticed how in other wealthy families the wife or the husband often seemed quite cheerful and calm despite the recent death – just as if nothing had happened. Oliver was very surprised to see all this, and greatly admired them for controlling their sadness so well. He was treated badly by most of the people around him. Noah was jealous, because Oliver went out to burials while he was left back in the shop, so he treated him even worse than before. Charlotte treated him badly because Noah did. And Mrs Sowerberry was his enemy because Mr Sowerberry was supposed to be his friend.

One day something happened which might seem unimportant, but which had a great effect on Oliver's future. Noah was in a particularly bad mood one dinner-time, and so he tried to make Oliver cry by hitting him, pulling his hair, and calling him horrible names. This was all unsuccessful, so he tried personal insults. 'Workhouse, how's your mother?' he asked.

'She's dead,' replied Oliver, his face going red with emotion.

Noah hoped that Oliver was going to cry, so he continued. 'What did she die of, Workhouse?'

‘Of a broken heart, I was told.’ And a tear rolled down Oliver’s cheek.

‘Why are you crying, Workhouse?’

Oliver remained silent, and Noah grew braver. ‘You know, I feel very sorry for you, Workhouse, but the truth is your mother was a wicked woman.’

Oliver seemed suddenly to wake up. ‘What did you say?’ ‘She was so bad it was lucky she died, or she would have ended up in prison, or hung.’

His face bright red with anger, Oliver jumped up, seized Noah’s throat, and shook the older boy so violently that his teeth nearly fell out. Then he hit him with all his strength and knocked him to the ground.

‘He’ll murder me!’ screamed Noah. ‘Charlotte! Help! Oliver’s gone mad —’ Charlotte and Mrs Sowerberry ran in and screamed in horror. They took hold of Oliver and began to beat him. Then Noah got up and started to kick him from behind. When they were all tired, they forced Oliver, who was still fighting and shouting, into the cellar and locked it.

Mrs Sowerberry sat down, breathing heavily. ‘He’s like a wild animal!’ she said. ‘We could all have been murdered in our beds!’

‘I hope Mr Sowerberry doesn’t take any more of these dreadful creatures from the workhouse,’ said Charlotte. ‘Poor Noah was nearly killed!’

Mrs Sowerberry looked at Noah sympathetically. Noah, who was twice Oliver's size, pretended to rub tears from his eyes. 'What shall we do?' cried Mrs Sowerberry. 'He'll kick that door down in ten minutes.' They could hear Oliver banging and kicking at the cellar door. 'Noah – run and get Mr Bumble.'

So Noah ran through the streets as quickly as he could to fetch the beadle. When he reached the workhouse, he waited for a minute to make sure his face was suitably tearful and frightened. As soon as Mr Bumble came out, Noah cried, 'Mr Bumble! Mr Bumble! It's Oliver Twist, sir. He's become violent. He tried to murder me, sir! And Charlotte, and Mrs Sowerberry as well.'

Mr Bumble was shocked and angry. 'Did he? I'll come up there immediately and beat him with my stick.' When he arrived at the shop, Oliver was still kicking wildly at the cellar door.

'Let me out!' he shouted from the cellar, when he heard Mr Bumble's voice. 'I'm not afraid of you!'

Mr Bumble stopped for a moment, amazed and even rather frightened by this change in Oliver. Then he said to Mrs Sowerberry, 'It's the meat that's caused this, you know.' 'What?' 'Meat, madam. You've fed him too well here. Back in the workhouse this would never have happened.'

'I knew I was too generous to him,' said Mrs Sowerberry, raising her eyes to the ceiling. At that moment, Mr Sowerberry returned and, hearing what had happened (according to the ladies), he beat Oliver so hard that even Mr Bumble and Mrs Sowerberry were satisfied. Mr Sowerberry was not a cruel man, but he had no choice.

He knew that if he didn't punish Oliver, his wife would never forgive him.

That night, alone in the room with the coffins, Oliver cried bitter, lonely tears. He did not sleep, and very early in the morning, before anyone was awake, he quietly unlocked the shop door and left the house. He ran up the street and through the town as far as the main road, where he saw a sign that told him it was just seventy miles from there to London. The name *London* gave the boy an idea. That huge place! Nobody, not even Mr Bumble, could ever find him there! He had heard old men in the workhouse say it was a good place for brave boys, and that there was always work there for those that wanted it. It would be the best place for him. He jumped to his feet and walked forward again. But after only four miles, he began to realize just how far he would have to walk. He stopped to think about it. He had a piece of bread, a rough shirt, two pairs of socks and a penny. But he could not see how these would help him get to London any faster, so he continued walking. He walked twenty miles that day. The only thing he had to eat was his piece of bread and some water which he begged from houses near the road.

He slept the first night in a field, feeling lonely, tired, cold and hungry. He was even hungrier the next morning when he woke up, and he had to buy some more bread with his penny. That day he walked only twelve miles. His legs were so weak that they shook beneath him.

The next day he tried to beg for money, but large signs in some villages warned him that anyone caught begging would be sent to prison. Travelers on the road refused to give him money; they said he was a lazy young dog and didn't deserve anything. Farmers threatened to send their dogs after him. When he waited outside pubs, the pub-

owners chased him away because they thought he had come to steal something. Only two people were kind enough to feed him: an old woman and a gate-keeper on the road. If they had not given him some food, he surely would have died like his mother.

Early on the seventh morning of his journey, Oliver finally reached the little town of Barnet, just outside London. Exhausted, he sat down at the side of the road. His feet were bleeding and he was covered in dust. He was too tired even to beg. Then he noticed that a boy, who had passed him a few minutes before, had returned, and was now looking at him carefully from the opposite side of the road. After a long time, the boy crossed the road and said to Oliver, ‘Hello! What’s the matter then?’ The boy was about Oliver’s age, but was one of the strangest-looking people he had ever seen. He had a dirty, ordinary boy’s face, but he behaved as if he were an adult. He was short for his age and had little, sharp, ugly eyes. His hat was stuck on top of his head but it looked as though it would blow off at any minute. He wore a man’s coat which reached almost down to his feet, with sleeves so long that his hands were completely covered.

‘I’m very tired and hungry,’ answered Oliver, almost crying. ‘I’ve been walking for a week.’

‘A week! The magistrate’s order, was it?’

‘The magistrate? What’s that?’

‘A magistrate’s a kind of judge,’ explained the surprised young gentleman. He realized Oliver did not have much experience of the world. ‘Never mind that. You want some food,’ he went on. ‘I haven’t got much money but don’t worry – I’ll pay.’ The boy helped Oliver to his feet, and took him to a pub. Meat, bread, and beer were placed

before Oliver, and his new friend urged him to satisfy his hunger. While Oliver was eating, the strange boy looked at him from time to time with great attention. 'Going to London?' he asked him finally.

'Yes.'

'Got anywhere to live?'

'No.'

'Money?'

'No.'

The strange boy whistled, and put his arms into his pockets as far as the big coat sleeves would allow him. 'I suppose you want to sleep somewhere tonight, don't you?'

'I do,' replied Oliver. 'I haven't slept under a roof since I started my journey.'

'Well, don't worry. I've got to be in London tonight, and I know a very nice old gentleman there who'll let you live in his place and not even ask you for money!'

Oliver was deeply grateful for this offer of shelter and talked for a long time with his new friend. His name was Jack Dawkins, but he was usually called 'The Artful Dodger'. 'Artful' because he was very clever at getting what he wanted; and 'Dodger' because he was very good at not getting caught when he did something wrong. When he heard this, Oliver felt rather doubtful about having such a friend. However, he wanted first to meet the kind old gentleman in London,

who would help him. After that, he could decide whether to continue the friendship with the Artful Dodger.

Four

Oliver in London

For some reason, the Dodger did not want to enter London during daylight, so it was nearly eleven o'clock at night when they got near the center. Oliver had never seen a dirtier or more miserable place. The streets in this district were narrow and muddy, and there were terrible smells everywhere. Children wandered around even at this time of night, in and out of the many shops, playing and screaming. The pubs were full of people fighting, and big, evil-looking men stood in doorways or at dark corners. Oliver almost wanted to run away, but just then the Dodger pushed open a door and pulled Oliver into a dark hall.

'Who's there?' a voice cried out.

'It's me,' said the Dodger. The faint light of a candle appeared in the hall.

'Who's the other one?'

'A new friend.'

They went up some dark and broken stairs. Oliver could hardly see where he was going, but the Dodger seemed to know the way, and helped Oliver up. They entered a room with walls that were black with age and dirt. In front of the fire was a table with a candle stuck into a bottle of beer, and an old man, with a horribly ugly face and red hair, stood next to the fire cooking. He was wearing a dirty old coat and seemed to divide his attention between his cooking and a number of silk handkerchiefs, which were hanging near the fire. There were several rough beds in the room. Four or five boys, about the same age as the Artful Dodger, sat round the table, smoking and drinking like middle-aged men. They all looked up when the Dodger and Oliver entered.

‘This is him, Fagin,’ the Dodger said to the old man. ‘My friend Oliver Twist.’

Fagin smiled and shook Oliver’s hand. Then all the young gentlemen came up to him and shook both his hands very hard, especially the hand which held his few possessions. One of the boys was particularly kind. He even put his hands in Oliver’s pockets so that Oliver would not have to empty them himself when he went to bed. The boys would probably have been even more helpful, but Fagin hit them on their heads and shoulders until they left Oliver alone.

‘We’re very glad to see you, Oliver,’ said Fagin. ‘I see you’re staring at the handkerchiefs, my dear. Aren’t there a lot? We’ve just taken them all out to wash them, that’s all! Ha! Ha! Ha!’

This seemed to be a joke, as the old gentleman and all his young friends gave loud shouts of laughter. Then supper began. Oliver ate his share of the food and was then given a glass of gin-and-water.

Fagin told him to drink it fast. Immediately afterwards, Oliver felt himself lifted onto one of the beds and he sank into a deep sleep.

When he woke, it was late morning. Fagin was the only other person in the room, and he was boiling coffee in a pan. When the coffee was done, he turned towards Oliver and looked closely at the boy. Oliver was only just awake and his eyes were half-closed, so he seemed to be still fast asleep.

Fagin then locked the door and from a hidden hole in the floor, he took out a small box, which he placed carefully on the table. His eyes shone as he opened it and took out a gold watch covered in jewels. ‘Aah!’ he said to himself. ‘What fine men they were! Loyal to the end. They never told the priest where the jewels were. Nor about old Fagin. Not even at the very end. And why should they? It was already too late. It wouldn’t have stopped the rope going round their necks!’

Fagin took out at least six more watches, as well as rings and bracelets and many other valuable pieces of jewelry. He looked at them with pleasure, then replaced them. ‘What a good thing hanging is!’ he murmured. ‘Dead men can never talk, or betray old friends!’

At that moment he looked up and saw Oliver watching him. He closed the lid of the box with a loud crash, and picked up a bread knife from the table. ‘Why are you watching me? What have you seen? Tell me – quick!’

‘I couldn’t sleep any longer, sir,’ said Oliver, terrified. ‘I’m very sorry.’

‘You weren’t awake an hour ago?’ Fagin asked fiercely, still holding the knife.

‘I promise I wasn’t, sir,’ replied Oliver.

‘Don’t worry, my dear,’ Fagin said, putting down the knife and becoming once again the kind old gentleman. He laughed. ‘I only tried to frighten you, my dear. You’re a brave boy, Oliver! And did you see any of the pretty things?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Ah,’ said Fagin, turning rather pale. ‘They – they’re mine, Oliver. All I have, in my old age.’

Oliver wondered why the old man lived in such an old, dirty place, when he had so many watches, but then he thought that it must cost Fagin a lot of money to look after the Dodger and the other boys. So he said nothing, and got up and washed. When he turned towards Fagin, the box had disappeared. Soon the Dodger entered with a cheerful young man named Charley Bates.

‘Have you been at work this morning?’ Fagin asked the Dodger.

‘Hard at work,’ answered the Dodger.

‘Good boys, good boys!’ said Fagin. ‘What have you got?’

‘A couple of pocket-books and some handkerchiefs.’

‘Good workers, aren’t they, Oliver?’ said the old man.

‘Very good,’ said Oliver.

The others all started laughing, though Oliver saw nothing funny in his answer. Fagin inspected the handkerchiefs and told the

two boys that they were extremely well made and that he was very pleased with their work.

After breakfast they played a very strange game. The cheerful old man put a watch in his jacket pocket, with a guard-chain round his neck, and a notebook and a handkerchief in his trouser pocket. Then he went up and down the room holding a walking stick, just like the old gentlemen who walked in the streets. Sometimes he stopped at the fireplace, and sometimes at the door, pretending to stare with great interest into shop windows. He would then constantly look round, as if afraid of thieves, touching all his pockets in such a natural and funny way that Oliver laughed until the tears ran down his face. All the time, the two boys followed Fagin everywhere, and every time he turned round, they moved out of his sight so quickly that it was impossible to follow their movements. Finally, the Dodger bumped into him accidentally from behind, and at that moment both boys took from him, very quickly, his watch, guard-chain, handkerchief, and notebook. If the old man felt a hand in any of his pockets he cried out, and then the game began again.

Later, the boys went out again to do some more work. When they had gone, Fagin turned to Oliver. 'Take my advice, my dear,' he said. 'Make them your models. Especially the Dodger. He'll be a great man himself, and will make you one too, if you copy him. Is my handkerchief hanging out of my pocket, my dear?'

'Yes, sir,' said Oliver.

'See if you can take it out, without my feeling it. Just as you saw them doing it when we were playing.'

Oliver held up the bottom of the pocket with one hand, as he had seen the Dodger hold it, and pulled the handkerchief lightly out of it with the other.

‘Has it gone?’ asked Fagin.

‘Here it is, sir,’ said Oliver, showing it in his hand.

‘You’re a clever boy, my dear,’ said the old gentleman, putting his hand on Oliver’s head. ‘I’ve never seen a quicker boy. If you go on like this, you’ll be the greatest man in London. Now come here and I’ll show you how to take the marks out of handkerchiefs.’

Oliver wondered what the connection was between playing at stealing from the old gentleman’s pocket and becoming a great man. But he followed him quietly to the table and was soon deeply involved in his new study.

Oliver remained in Fagin’s room for many days, picking the marks and names out of the handkerchiefs and sometimes playing the same game as before. One evening two young ladies came to visit, and a very cheerful party followed. Oliver thought they were very nice, friendly girls.

The Dodger and Charley Bates went out to work every day, but sometimes came home with no handkerchiefs, and Fagin would get very angry. Once he even knocked them both down the stairs and sent them to bed with no dinner because they had returned with nothing.

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.

