

# Oliver Twist

CHARLES DICKENS

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## OLIVER TWIST

When *Oliver Twist* was first published in 1838, it was not fashionable to write novels that showed life in all its miserable reality. But Dickens wanted to shock his readers. He wanted to show criminals as they really were, and to reveal all the horrors and violence that hid in the narrow, dirty backstreets of London. So he gives us the evil Fagin, the brutal Bill Sikes, and a crowd of thieves and robbers, who lie and cheat and steal, and live in fear of prison or the hangman's rope around their necks.

Dickens also had another purpose. He wanted to show that goodness can survive through every kind of hardship. So he gives us little Oliver Twist – an orphan thrown into a world of poverty and crime, starved and beaten and unloved. He gives us Nancy – poor, miserable, unhappy Nancy, who struggles to stay loyal in a cruel world.

And, as in all the best stories, goodness triumphs over evil in the end.

CHARLES DICKENS

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# Oliver Twist

*Retold by*  
Richard Rogers



OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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## PEOPLE IN THIS STORY

Oliver Twist

Mrs Mann, *in charge of the 'baby farm'*

Mr Bumble, *the beadle*

Mrs Corney, *a widow, in charge of the workhouse*

Old Sally, *a woman in the workhouse*

Mr Sowerberry, *an undertaker*

Mrs Sowerberry, *his wife*

Charlotte, *the Sowerberrys' servant*

Noah Claypole, *a charity-boy*

Fagin

The Artful Dodger } *Fagin's boys*

Charley Bates

Bill Sikes, *a robber*

Nancy, *Bill Sikes' girl*

Monks, *a mysterious stranger*

Mr Brownlow, *an old gentleman*

Mrs Bedwin, *Mr Brownlow's housekeeper*

Mr Grimwig, *an old friend of Mr Brownlow's*

Mrs Maylie, *a kind lady*

Harry Maylie, *her son*

Rose Maylie, *her niece*

Dr Losberne, *a friend of the Maylies'*

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## Oliver's early life

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 to, 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.

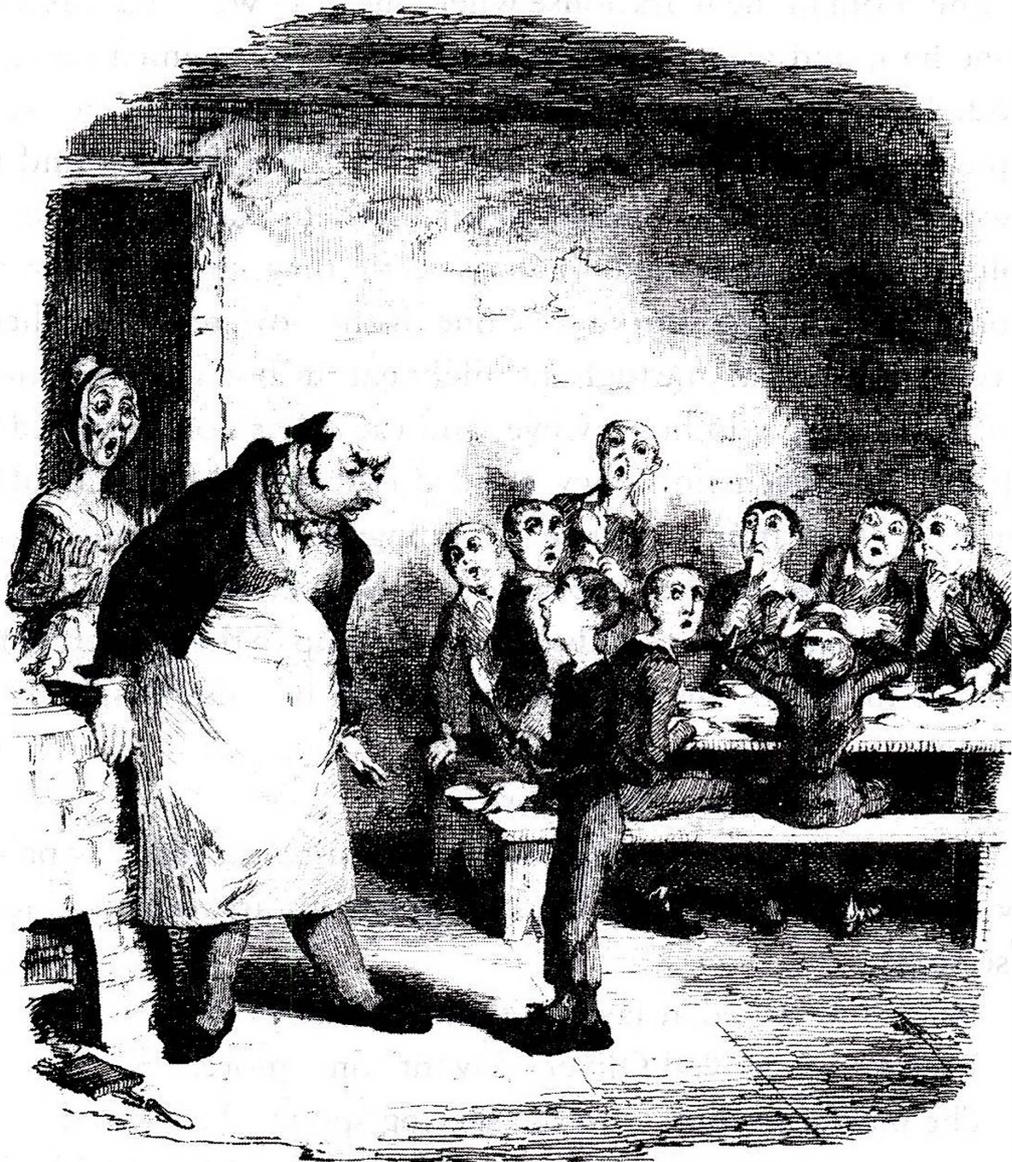
'Please, sir,' replied Oliver, 'I want some more.'

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.

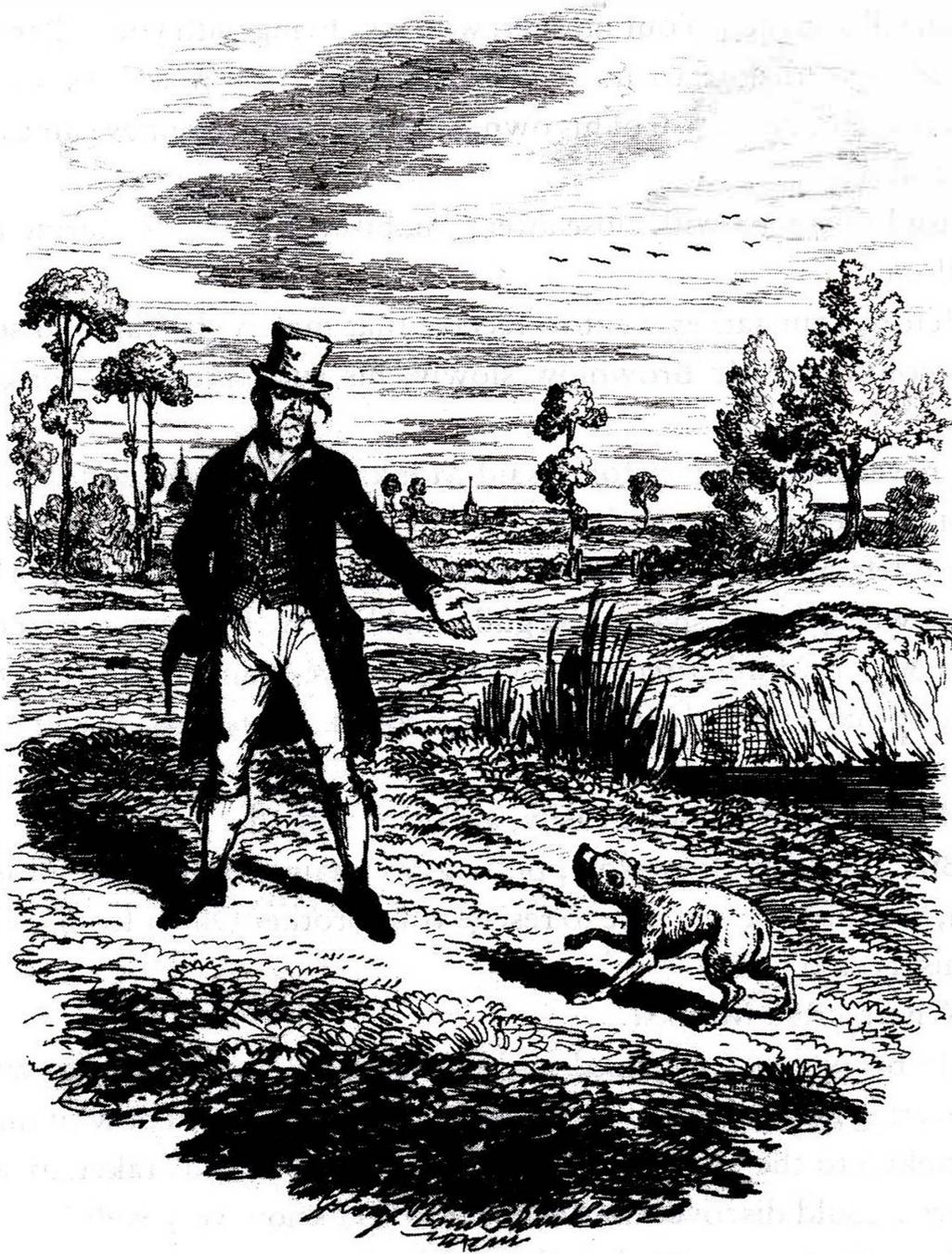
‘He asked for *more*?’ Mr Limbkins, the fattest board member, asked in horror. ‘Bumble – is this really true?’

‘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.



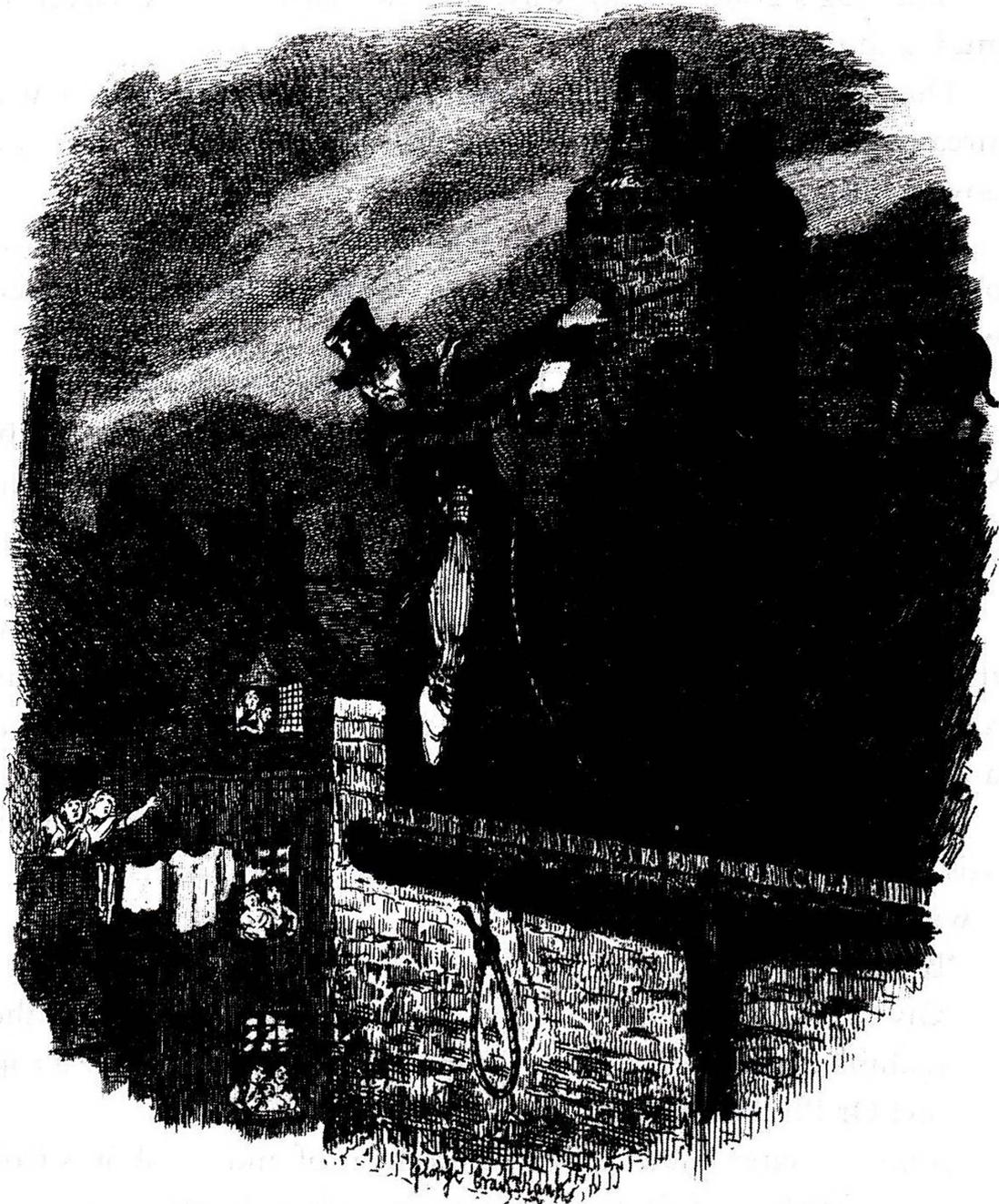
*‘Please, sir, I want some more.’*



*Sikes decided to drown his dog.*

became engaged to the older daughter. At this point one of his rich relations died and left him a lot of money in his will. Your father had to travel to Italy to receive his inheritance, and while there, he

tied the rope around the chimney, then began to tie the other end around himself, ready to lower himself to the ground behind the house. But just as he put the rope over his head, he screamed in



*Sikes quickly tied the rope around the chimney.*

terror and threw his arms above his head. He staggered back, slipped and fell over the edge of the roof. As he fell, the rope tightened around his neck with a horrible jerk. In a second the murderer was dead, and there he hung, his body swinging gently from side to side. The dog, which had followed its master onto the roof, jumped down towards the lifeless body, missed, and fell dead on the stones below.

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*The end of the mystery*

The next day Oliver travelled with Mr Brownlow, Dr Losberne, Mrs Maylie and Rose back to his birthplace. He had been told a little of his history, and knew that there would be more explanations at the end of this journey. He was anxious and uncertain, wondering what he would hear.

But towards the end of the journey, he began to recognize familiar places, and in great excitement pointed them out to Rose. There was the path he had taken when he had run away. There, across the fields, was the 'baby farm'. Then, as they drove into the town, he saw the house of Mr Sowerberry the undertaker, and the workhouse that had been his prison.

They stopped at the biggest hotel in the town, and went in to their rooms. During dinner Mr Brownlow stayed in a separate room, and the older members of the group went in and out with serious faces. Mrs Maylie came back with her eyes red from crying. All this made Rose and Oliver, who had not been told any new secrets, very nervous and uncomfortable.

At nine o'clock Dr Losberne and Mr Brownlow brought Monks

into the room. Oliver was very surprised; this was the same man he had bumped into once outside a pub, and seen another time with Fagin, looking in at him through the window of the country cottage. Oliver was told that Monks was his half-brother, and the boy stared at him in shock and amazement. Monks looked back at him with hatred.

‘We have the whole story here in these papers,’ said Mr Brownlow, putting them on the table. ‘All we need now is for you to sign them, Monks. And to tell Oliver what happened.’

Monks started hesitantly. ‘My father had arrived in Italy to collect the money he had inherited, when suddenly he fell ill. When he died, we found two papers in his desk. One was a letter to his girl; the other was a will.’

‘What was the letter?’ asked Mr Brownlow.

‘It was written when he was ill, telling the girl how ashamed he was that she was pregnant. He asked her not to remember him as a bad man but as someone who had made a mistake. He reminded her of the day he’d given her the locket and ring.’

Oliver’s tears fell fast as he listened to the story of his father.

‘And what about the will?’ asked Mr Brownlow.

Monks was silent.

‘The will’, continued Mr Brownlow, speaking for him, ‘was in the same spirit as the letter. He talked of the misery of his marriage to his wife, and the evil character of you, Monks, his only son, who had been brought up by your mother to hate him. He left you and your mother an annual income of £800. The rest of his property he left to his girl Agnes and to their child, if it were born alive, and if it showed itself to be of a good, kind character. The money would only go to you, Monks, as the older son, if the younger turned out to be as evil as you.’

‘My mother’, said Monks, ‘burnt this will, and never sent the letter. The girl Agnes left her home in secret, so that her pregnancy would not bring shame on her family. I swore to my mother, when she was dying, that if I ever found my half-brother, I would do him all the harm I could. He would feel my hatred like a whip on his back. I paid Fagin to trap Oliver into a life of crime. But then he escaped, and that stupid, interfering girl Nancy talked to you. If I’d had the chance, I would have finished what I’d begun.’ Monks stared at Oliver, and his lips moved in a silent curse.

‘And the locket and ring?’ asked Mr Brownlow.

‘I bought them from Mr and Mrs Bumble, who had stolen them from the nurse, who had stolen them from Agnes, the dead girl. I’ve already told you how I threw them into the river.’

Mr Brownlow turned to Rose. ‘I have one more thing to explain,’ he said to the girl.

‘I don’t know if I have the strength to hear it now,’ she murmured, ‘having heard so much already.’

Mr Brownlow put his hand under her arm. ‘You have a great deal of courage, dear child,’ he said kindly. He turned to Monks. ‘Do you know this young lady, sir?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know you,’ said Rose faintly.

‘The father of poor Agnes had *two* daughters,’ said Mr Brownlow. ‘What happened to the other one, who was only a young child at the time?’

‘When Agnes disappeared,’ replied Monks, ‘her father changed his name and moved to a lonely place in Wales, where no one would know about the family shame. He died very soon afterwards, and this young daughter was taken in by some poor people. My mother hated Agnes and everybody connected with her. She hunted for this

young sister, and made sure that her life would be unhappy. She told the poor people who had taken her in that the girl was illegitimate, and that she came from a bad family with an evil reputation. So the child led a life of miserable poverty – until Mrs Maylie saw her by chance, pitied her, and took her home.'

'And do you see this young sister now?' asked Mr Brownlow.

'Yes. Standing by your side.'

Rose could hardly speak. 'So . . . Oliver is my nephew?'

'I can never call you aunt,' cried Oliver. 'You'll always be my own dear sister!'

They ran into each other's arms, both of them crying in their happiness. A father, sister and mother had been lost and gained, and it was too much for one evening. They stood for a long time in silence, and the others left them alone.

The court was full of faces; from every corner, all eyes were on one man – Fagin. In front of him, behind, above, below – he seemed surrounded by staring eyes. Not one of the faces showed any sympathy towards him; all were determined that he should hang. At last, there was a cry of 'Silence!', and everyone looked towards the door. The jury returned, and passed close to Fagin. He could tell nothing from their faces; they could have been made of stone. Then there was complete stillness – not a whisper, not a breath . . . Guilty. The whole court rang with a great shout, echoing through all the rooms as the crowd ran out of the building to tell all the people waiting outside. The news was that he would die on Monday.

Fagin thought of nothing but death that night. He began to remember all the people he had ever known who had been hanged. He could hardly count them. They might have sat in the same prison cell as he was now. He thought about death by hanging –

BOOKWORMS · CLASSICS · STAGE 5

# David Copperfield

CHARLES DICKENS

*Retold by Clare West*

‘Please, Mr Murdstone! Don’t beat me! I’ve tried to learn my lessons, really I have, sir!’ sobs David.

Although he is only eight years old, Mr Murdstone does beat him, and David is so frightened that he bites his cruel stepfather’s hand. For that, he is kept locked in his room for five days and nights, and nobody is allowed to speak to him.

As David grows up, he learns that life is full of trouble and misery and cruelty. But he also finds laughter and kindness, trust and friendship ... and love.

BOOKWORMS · CLASSICS · STAGE 6

# Pride and Prejudice

JANE AUSTEN

*Retold by Clare West*

‘The moment I first met you, I noticed your pride, your sense of superiority, and your selfish disdain for the feelings of others. You are the last man in the world whom I could ever be persuaded to marry,’ said Elizabeth Bennet.

And so Elizabeth rejects the proud Mr Darcy. Can nothing overcome her prejudice against him? And what of the other Bennet girls – their fortunes, and misfortunes, in the business of getting husbands?

This famous novel by Jane Austen is full of wise and humorous observation of the people and manners of her times.

# Oliver Twist



London in the 1830s was no place to be if you were a hungry ten-year-old boy, an orphan without friends or family, with no home to go to, and only a penny in your pocket to buy a piece of bread.

But Oliver Twist finds some friends – Fagin, the Artful Dodger, and Charley Bates. They give him food and shelter, and play games with him, but it is not until some days later that Oliver finds out what kind of friends they are and what kind of ‘games’ they play . . . (Word count 26,560)



- ◀ STAGE 6
- ◀ STAGE 5
- ◀ STAGE 4
- ◀ STAGE 3
- ◀ STAGE 2
- ◀ STAGE 1
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STAGE 6 *Oliver Twist*

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