Oliver Twist

Charles Dickens

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Sample extract from Oliver Twist includes:

Introduction by Garth Nix
Who's who in Oliver Twist
Extract from Oliver Twist
Biography of Charles Dickens

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INTRODUCTION BY
GARTH NIX

'Please, sir, I want some more.'

That's probably one of the most famous lines in fiction, spoken by the young orphan Oliver Twist when he dares to ask for some more food in the workhouse. Probably more people know that line from the films and television series based on the book – there have been more than twenty different versions of *Oliver Twist* on film and television – but I bet, whether they've read the book or just seen it on the screen, almost anyone you say that line to will know where it comes from.

Why have there been so many film, television and stage productions of *Oliver Twist*? It's simply because it is such a great story, full of wonderful characters, strong emotions and colourful settings. There's Oliver himself, a likeable boy born into terrible misfortune, who somehow always seems to rise above his environment and circumstance. He suffers terribly, but something inside him is stronger than anything life throws at him in the dreadful workhouse, in

the undertaker's coffin-making workshop, amongst Fagin's pickpockets . . .

I first read *Oliver Twist* when I was about twelve or thirteen. Re-reading it recently, I realized that I must have skipped through whole passages of description and probably missed a bunch of incidental stuff with some of the minor characters. But you know what? It didn't matter. The story is so good that you can skim along the surface and enjoy the ride – you don't have to dip beneath and get into the deeper stuff that lies below.

The basic story of *Oliver Twist* is a great adventure, and it's a quest too, so how could I not love it? You can read it just for that adventure, and the great characters, and the dark, dangerous streets of nineteenth-century London, and enjoy suffering and triumph with Oliver, and hope that he can solve the riddle of his parentage, and the secret of the gold ring, and the sinister character who is the mastermind behind the murderer Sikes. Or you can read it more deeply, or read it again, and experience the adventure and at the same time absorb the historical detail and social criticism that is the foundation of the story.

Oliver Twist is a great novel that can be read in so many different ways and on so many different levels, and after reading it, like the many millions of readers who have gone before us, right back to 1837 when the first instalment was published, I expect you'll be at your bookshop or library to say, 'Please, Sir, I want some more Dickens.'

WHO'S WHO IN *OLIVER TWIST*

Oliver Twist – the hero of the book. Oliver is an orphan who grows up abused and uncared-for in a workhouse, and is later tricked by Fagin into joining his gang of thieves. But Oliver's native honesty, strength and goodness enable him to resist and ultimately overcome his dreadful surroundings.

Edwin Leeford and Agnes Fleming – Oliver's dead parents. They were never married, which in those days meant that they (particularly Agnes), and any children they had, would have been considered to be second-class citizens.

In Oliver's Home Town

Mr Bumble – a self-satisfied, hypocritical bully, Mr Bumble is a beadle (a sort of local policeman).

Mrs Mann – runs the house for orphans. Mrs Mann steals most of the money she is given to buy food for the orphans, and not only mistreats but sometimes actually murders them.

Susan – Mrs Mann's assistant.

Mrs Corney – the cold, selfish matron of the workhouse, Mrs Corney is a widow and later marries Mr Bumble.

Mr and Mrs Sowerberry – owners of an undertaker's, where Oliver is taken on as an apprentice.

Noah Claypole – an older boy working at the undertaker's.

Charlotte – the Sowerberrys' maid and Noah's girlfriend.

Mr Gamfield – a cruel chimney-sweeper. Oliver narrowly escapes being apprenticed to him.

Dick – a friend of Oliver's.

Mr Slout, Mr Grannett and Mr Limbkins – other officials of the workhouse and the parish.

Sally, Anny and Martha – old women who live in the workhouse that Oliver grows up in.

In the London Underworld

Fagin – an old Jewish man who runs a gang of young thieves and sells on stolen goods, amongst other nefarious activities. Devious, ruthless and manipulative, he can also be charming and funny. The fact that Fagin is Jewish is often mentioned in *Oliver Twist*, and ever since it was first published many people have been troubled by the fact that he sometimes seems to be evil because he is Jewish.

Nancy – a thief and prostitute who works for Fagin, Nancy has a streak of good in her, which leads her to help Oliver despite great risk to herself.

Bill Sikes – a brutal robber who works with, but is also hated by, Fagin. Bill is Nancy's boyfriend, and also owns a dog called Bull's-eye, who is the canine equivalent of himself.

Monks – an acquaintance of Fagin's with a mysterious and malevolent interest in what happens to Oliver.

Jack Dawkins (the Artful Dodger), Charley Bates, Barney, Bet, Tom Chitling, Toby Crackit, Mr Lively and Kags – other acquaintances and accomplices of Fagin's.

The Brownlow and Maylie Families

Mr Brownlow – a kind bachelor who takes pity on Oliver when he is falsely accused of pickpocketing, and tries to help him.

Mrs Bedwin – Mr Brownlow's housekeeper.

Mr Grimwig – a gruff, eccentric old gentleman who is a friend of Mr Brownlow's.

Mrs Maylie – owner of a large house which Bill Sikes and Fagin try to rob with the forced assistance of Oliver.

Miss Rose – companion to Mrs Maylie.

Harry Maylie – Mrs Maylie's son, who is in love with Rose.

Mr Losberne – an impetuous surgeon in Mrs Maylie's neighbourhood, and a friend of the Maylies.

Mr Giles, Joe and Brittles – servants to the Maylies.

The Long Arm of the Law

Mr Fang – drunken and incompetent magistrate, who nearly sentences Oliver to three months' hard labour.

1

Among other public buildings in a certain town which for many reasons it will be prudent to refrain from mentioning, it boasts of one which is common to most towns, great or small, to wit, a workhouse; and in this workhouse was born the item of mortality whose name is prefixed to this book. For a long time after he was ushered into this world of sorrow and trouble, by the parish surgeon, it remained a matter of considerable doubt whether the child would survive to bear any name at all; in which case it is somewhat more than probable that these memoirs would never have appeared, or, if they had, being comprised within a couple of pages, that they would have possessed the inestimable merit of being the most concise and faithful specimen of biography extant in the literature of any age or country. The fact is, that there was considerable difficulty in inducing Oliver to take upon himself the office of respiration, – a troublesome practice, but one which custom has rendered necessary to our easy existence, – and for some time he lay gasping on a

little flock mattress, rather unequally poised between this world and the next, the balance being decidedly in favour of the latter. Now, if during this brief period, Oliver had been surrounded by careful grandmothers, anxious aunts, experienced nurses, and doctors of profound wisdom, he would most inevitably and indubitably have been killed in no time. There being nobody by, however, but a pauper old woman, who was rendered rather misty by an unwonted allowance of beer, and a parish surgeon who did such matters by contract, Oliver and Nature fought out the point between them. The result was, that, after a few struggles, Oliver breathed, sneezed, and proceeded to advertise to the inmates of the workhouse the fact of a new burden having been imposed upon the parish, by setting up as loud a cry as could reasonably have been expected from a male infant who had not been possessed of that very useful appendage, a voice, for a much longer space of time than three minutes and a quarter.

As Oliver gave this first proof of the free and proper action of his lungs, the patchwork coverlet which was carelessly flung over the iron bedstead, rustled; the pale face of a young female was raised feebly from the pillow; and a faint voice imperfectly articulated the words, 'Let me see the child, and die.'

The surgeon had been sitting with his face turned towards the fire, giving the palms of his hands a warm and a rub alternately; but as the young woman spoke, he

rose, and advancing to the bed's head, said, with more kindness than might have been expected of him –

'Oh, you must not talk about dying yet.'

'Lor bless her dear heart, no!' interposed the nurse, hastily depositing in her pocket a green glass bottle, the contents of which she had been tasting in a corner with evident satisfaction. 'Lor bless her dear heart, when she has lived as long as I have, sir, and had thirteen children of her own, and all on 'em dead except two, and them in the wurkus with me, she'll know better than to take on in that way, bless her dear heart! Think what it is to be a mother, there's a dear young lamb, do.'

Apparently this consolatory perspective of a mother's prospects failed in producing its due effect. The patient shook her head, and stretched out her hand towards the child.

The surgeon deposited it in her arms. She imprinted her cold white lips passionately on its forehead, passed her hands over her face, gazed wildly round, shuddered, fell back – and died. They chafed her breast, hands, and temples; but the blood had frozen for ever.

'It's all over, Mrs Thingummy,' said the surgeon at last.

'Ah, poor dear, so it is!' said the nurse, picking up the cork of the green bottle which had fallen out on the pillow as she stooped to take up the child. 'Poor dear!'

'You needn't mind sending up to me, if the child cries, nurse,' said the surgeon, putting on his gloves with great

deliberation. 'It's very likely it *will* be troublesome. Give it a little gruel if it is.' He put on his hat, and, pausing by the bed-side on his way to the door, added, 'She was a good-looking girl, too; where did she come from?'

'She was brought here last night,' replied the old woman. 'She was found lying in the street; – she had walked some distance, for her shoes were worn to pieces; but where she came from, or where she was going to, nobody knows.'

The surgeon leant over the body, and raised the left hand. 'The old story,' he said, shaking his head: 'no wedding-ring, I see. Ah! Good night!'

The medical gentleman walked away to dinner; and the nurse, having once more applied herself to the green bottle, sat down on a low chair before the fire, and proceeded to dress the infant.

2

The parish authorities resolved that Oliver should be 'farmed', or, in other words, that he should be dispatched to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor-laws rolled about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing, under the parental superintendence of an elderly female who received the culprits at and for the consideration of sevenpence-halfpenny per small head per week. Sevenpence-halfpenny's worth per week is a good round diet for a child; a great deal may be got for sevenpence-halfpenny – quite enough to overload its stomach, and make it uncomfortable. The elderly female was a woman of wisdom and experience; she knew what was good for children, and she had a very accurate perception of what was good for herself. So, she appropriated the greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to even a shorter allowance than was originally provided for them. Unfortunately, at the very moment when a child had

contrived to exist upon the smallest possible portion of the weakest possible food, it did perversely happen in eight and a half cases out of ten, either that it sickened from want and cold, or fell into the fire from neglect, or got half smothered by accident; in any one of which cases, the miserable little being was usually summoned into another world, and there gathered to the fathers it had never known in this.

Occasionally, when there was some more than usually interesting inquest upon a parish child, the jury would take it into their heads to ask troublesome questions, or the parishioners would rebelliously affix their signatures to a remonstrance: but these impertinences were speedily checked by the evidence of the surgeon, and the testimony of the beadle; the former of whom had always opened the body and found nothing inside (which was very probable indeed), and the latter of whom invariably swore whatever the parish wanted, which was very self-devotional. Besides, the board made periodical pilgrimages to the farm, and always sent the beadle the day before, to say they were going. The children were neat and clean to behold, when *they* went; and what more would the people have?

It cannot be expected that this system of farming would produce any very extraordinary or luxuriant crop. Oliver Twist's ninth birthday found him a pale thin child, somewhat diminutive in stature, and decidedly small in circumference. He was keeping it in the coal-

cellar with a select party of two other young gentlemen, who, after participating with him in a sound thrashing, had been locked up therein for atrociously presuming to be hungry, when Mrs Mann, the good lady of the house, was unexpectedly startled by the apparition of Mr Bumble the beadle striving to undo the wicket of the garden-gate.

'Goodness gracious! Is that you, Mr Bumble, sir?' said Mrs Mann, thrusting her head out of the window in well-affected ecstasies of joy. '(Susan, take Oliver and them two brats up stairs, and wash 'em directly.) My heart alive! Mr Bumble, how glad I am to see you, sure-ly!'

Now Mr Bumble was a fat man, and a choleric one; so, instead of responding to this open-hearted salutation in a kindred spirit, he gave the little wicket a tremendous shake, and then bestowed upon it a kick which could have emanated from no leg but a beadle's.

'Lor, only think,' said Mrs Mann, running out, – for the three boys had been removed by this time, – 'only think of that! That I should have forgotten that the gate was bolted on the inside, on account of them dear children! Walk in, sir; walk in, pray, Mr Bumble, do, sir.'

Although this invitation was accompanied with a curtsey that might have softened the heart of a churchwarden, it by no means mollified the beadle.

'Do you think this respectful or proper conduct, Mrs Mann,' inquired Mr Bumble, grasping his cane, '– to keep

the parish officers a-waiting at your garden-gate, when they come here upon porochial business connected with the porochial orphans? Are you aware, Mrs Mann, that you are, as I may say, a porochial delegate, and a stipendiary?'

'I'm sure, Mr Bumble, that I was only a-telling one or two of the dear children as is so fond of you, that it was you a-coming,' replied Mrs Mann with great humility.

Mr Bumble had a great idea of his oratorical powers and his importance. He had displayed the one, and vindicated the other. He relaxed.

'Well, well, Mrs Mann,' he replied in a calmer tone; 'it may be as you say; it may be. Lead the way in, Mrs Mann, for I come on business, and have got something to say.'

Mrs Mann ushered the beadle into a small parlour with a brick floor; placed a seat for him, and officiously deposited his cocked hat and cane on the table before him. Mr Bumble wiped from his forehead the perspiration which his walk had engendered, glanced complacently at the cocked hat, and smiled. Yes, he smiled: beadles are but men, and Mr Bumble smiled.

'Now don't you be offended at what I'm a-going to say,' observed Mrs Mann, with captivating sweetness. 'You've had a long walk, you know, or I wouldn't mention it. Now, will you take a little drop of something, Mr Bumble?'

'Not a drop. Not a drop,' said Mr Bumble, waving his right hand in a dignified, but still placid manner.

'I think you will,' said Mrs Mann, who had noticed the

tone of the refusal, and the gesture that had accompanied it. 'Just a *leetle* drop, with a little cold water, and a lump of sugar.'

Mr Bumble coughed.

'Now, just a little drop,' said Mrs Mann persuasively.

'What is it?' inquired the beadle.

'Why, it's what I'm obliged to keep a little of in the house, to put into the blessed infants' medicine, when they ain't well, Mr Bumble,' replied Mrs Mann as she opened a corner cupboard, and took down a bottle and glass. 'It's gin. I'll not deceive you, Mr B. It's gin.'

'Do you give the children medicine, Mrs Mann?' inquired Bumble, following with his eyes the interesting process of mixing.

'Ah, bless 'em, that I do, dear as it is,' replied the nurse. 'I couldn't see 'em suffer before my very eyes, you know, sir.'

'No,' said Mr Bumble approvingly; 'no, you could not. You are a humane woman, Mrs Mann.' – (Here she set down the glass.) – 'I shall take an early opportunity of mentioning it to the board, Mrs Mann.' – (He drew it towards him.) – 'You feel as a mother, Mrs Mann.' – (He stirred the gin-and-water.) – 'I – I drink your health with cheerfulness, Mrs Mann'; – and he swallowed half of it.

'And now about business,' said the beadle, taking out a leathern pocket-book. 'The child that was half-baptized Oliver Twist, is nine year old today.'

'Bless him!' interposed Mrs Mann, inflaming her left eye with the corner of her apron.

'And notwithstanding an offered reward of ten pound, which was afterwards increased to twenty pound, – notwithstanding the most superlative, and, I may say, supernat'ral exertions on the part of this parish,' said Bumble, 'we have never been able to discover who is his father, or what was his mother's settlement, name, or condition.'

Mrs Mann raised her hands in astonishment; but added, after a moment's reflection, 'How comes he to have any name at all, then?'

The beadle drew himself up with great pride, and said, 'I inwented it.'

'You, Mr Bumble!'

'I, Mrs Mann. We name our fondlings in alphabetical order. The last was a S, – Swubble, I named him. This was a T, – Twist, I named *him*. The next one as comes will be Unwin, and the next Vilkins. I have got names ready made to the end of the alphabet, and all the way through it again, when we come to Z.'

'Why, you're quite a literary character, sir!' said Mrs Mann.

'Well, well,' said the beadle, evidently gratified with the compliment; 'perhaps I may be, – perhaps I may be, Mrs Mann.' He finished the gin-and-water, and added, 'Oliver being now too old to remain here, the board have

determined to have him back into the house, and I have come out myself to take him there – so let me see him at once.'

'I'll fetch him directly,' said Mrs Mann, leaving the room for that purpose. And Oliver, having had by this time as much of the outer coat of dirt, which encrusted his face and hands, removed, as could be scrubbed off in one washing, was led into the room by his benevolent protectress.

'Make a bow to the gentleman, Oliver,' said Mrs Mann.

Oliver made a bow, which was divided between the beadle on the chair and the cocked hat on the table.

'Will you go along with me, Oliver?' said Mr Bumble in a majestic voice.

Oliver was about to say that he would go along with anybody with great readiness, when, glancing upward, he caught sight of Mrs Mann, who had got behind the beadle's chair, and was shaking her fist at him with a furious countenance. He took the hint at once, for the fist had been too often impressed upon his body not to be deeply impressed upon his recollection.

'Will *she* go with me?' inquired poor Oliver.

'No, she can't,' replied Mr Bumble. 'But she'll come and see you sometimes.'

This was no very great consolation to the child; but, young as he was, he had sense enough to make a feint of feeling great regret at going away. It was no very difficult

matter for the boy to call tears into his eyes. Hunger and recent ill-usage are great assistants if you want to cry; and Oliver cried very naturally indeed. Mrs Mann gave him a thousand embraces, and, what Oliver wanted a great deal more, a piece of bread and butter, lest he should seem too hungry when he got to the workhouse. With the slice of bread in his hand, and the little brown-cloth parish cap on his head, Oliver was then led away by Mr Bumble from the wretched home where one kind word or look had never lighted the gloom of his infant years. And yet he burst into an agony of childish grief as the cottage-gate closed after him. Wretched as were the little companions in misery he was leaving behind, they were the only friends he had ever known; and a sense of his loneliness in the great wide world sank into the child's heart for the first time.

Mr Bumble walked on with long strides, and little Oliver, firmly grasping his gold-laced cuff, trotted beside him, inquiring at the end of every quarter of a mile whether they were 'nearly there'. To these interrogations Mr Bumble returned very brief and snappish replies; for the temporary blandness which gin-and-water awakens in some bosoms had by this time evaporated, and he was once again a beadle.

Oliver had not been within the walls of the workhouse a quarter of an hour, and had scarcely completed the demolition of a second slice of bread, when Mr

Bumble, who had handed him over to the care of an old woman, returned, and, telling him it was a board night, informed him that the board had said he was to appear before it forthwith.

Not having a very clearly defined notion of what a live board was, Oliver was rather astounded by this intelligence, and was not quite certain whether he ought to laugh or cry. He had no time to think about the matter, however; for Mr Bumble gave him a tap on the head with his cane to wake him up, and another on the back to make him lively, and bidding him follow, conducted him into a large whitewashed room where eight or ten fat gentlemen were sitting round a table, at the top of which, seated in an arm-chair rather higher than the rest, was a particularly fat gentleman with a very round, red face.

'Bow to the board,' said Bumble. Oliver brushed away two or three tears that were lingering in his eyes, and seeing no board but the table, fortunately bowed to that.

'What's your name, boy?' said the gentleman in the high chair.

Oliver was frightened at the sight of so many gentlemen, which made him tremble; and the beadle gave him another tap behind, which made him cry; and these two causes made him answer in a very low and hesitating voice; whereupon a gentleman in a white waistcoat said he was a fool. Which was a capital way of raising his spirits, and putting him quite at his ease.

'Boy,' said the gentleman in the high chair, 'listen to me. You know you're an orphan, I suppose?'

'What's that, sir?' inquired poor Oliver.

'The boy *is* a fool – I thought he was,' said the gentleman in the white waistcoat, in a very decided tone. If one member of a class be blessed with an intuitive perception of others of the same race, the gentleman in the white waistcoat was unquestionably well qualified to pronounce an opinion on the matter.

'Hush!' said the gentleman who had spoken first. 'You know you've got no father or mother, and that you were brought up by the parish, don't you?'

'Yes, sir,' replied Oliver, weeping bitterly.

'What are you crying for?' inquired the gentleman in the white waistcoat. And to be sure it was very extraordinary. What *could* the boy be crying for?

'I hope you say your prayers every night,' said another gentleman in a gruff voice, 'and pray for the people who feed you, and take care of you, like a Christian.'

'Yes, sir,' stammered the boy. The gentleman who spoke last was unconsciously right. It would have been *very* like a Christian, and a marvellously good Christian, too, if Oliver had prayed for the people who fed and took care of *him*. But he hadn't, because nobody had taught him.

'Well! You have come here to be educated, and taught a useful trade,' said the red-faced gentleman in the high chair.

'So you'll begin to pick oakum tomorrow morning at six o'clock,' added the surly one in the white waistcoat.

Poor Oliver! He little thought, as he lay sleeping in happy unconsciousness of all around him, that the board had that very day arrived at a decision which would exercise the most material influence over all his future fortunes. But they had. And this was it:

The members of this board were very sage, deep, philosophical men, and when they came to turn their attention to the workhouse, they found out at once, what ordinary folks would never have discovered – the poor people liked it! It was a regular place of public entertainment for the poorer classes; a tavern where there was nothing to pay; a public breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper all the year round; a brick and mortar elysium, where it was all play and no work. 'Oho!' said the board, looking very knowing; 'we are the fellows to set this to rights; we'll stop it all, in no time.' So, they established the rule, that all poor people should have the alternative (for they would compel nobody, not they), of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it. With this view, they contracted with the water-works to lay on an unlimited supply of water; and with a corn-factor to supply periodically small quantities of oatmeal; and issued three meals of thin gruel a day, with an onion twice a week, and half a roll on Sundays. They made a great many other wise and humane regulations, which it is not necessary to repeat.

For the first six months after Oliver Twist was removed, the system was in full operation. It was rather expensive at first, in consequence of the increase in the undertaker's bill, and the necessity of taking in the clothes of all the paupers, which fluttered loosely on their wasted, shrunken forms, after a week or two's gruel. But the number of workhouse inmates got thin as well as the paupers; and the board were in ecstasies.

The room in which the boys were fed was a large stone hall, with a copper at one end, out of which the master, dressed in an apron for the purpose, and assisted by one or two women, ladled the gruel at meal-times; of which composition each boy had one porringer, and no more – except on festive occasions, and then he had two ounces and a quarter of bread besides. The bowls never wanted washing. The boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again; and when they had performed this operation (which never took very long, the spoons being nearly as large as the bowls), they would sit staring at the copper with such eager eyes as if they could have devoured the very bricks of which it was composed; employing themselves, meanwhile, in sucking their fingers most assiduously, with the view of catching up any stray splashes of gruel that might have been cast thereon. Boys have generally excellent appetites. Oliver Twist and his companions suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months: at last they

got so voracious and wild with hunger, that one boy, who was tall for his age, and hadn't been used to that sort of thing (for his father had kept a small cookshop), hinted darkly to his companions, that unless he had another basin of gruel *per diem*, he was afraid he might some night happen to eat the boy who slept next him, who happened to be a weakly youth of tender age. He had a wild, hungry eye; and they implicitly believed him. A council was held; lots were cast who should walk up to the master after supper that evening, and ask for more; and it fell to Oliver Twist.

The evening arrived; the boys took their places. The master, in his cook's uniform, stationed himself at the copper; his pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him; the gruel was served out; and a long grace was said over the short commons. The gruel disappeared; the boys whispered each other, and winked at Oliver, while his next neighbours nudged him. Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table, and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said: somewhat alarmed at his own temerity:

'Please, sir, I want some more.'

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds, and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralysed with wonder; the boys with fear.

'What!' said the master at length, in a faint voice.

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

The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle, pinioned him in his arms, and shrieked aloud for the beadle.

The board were sitting in solemn conclave, when Mr Bumble rushed into the room in great excitement, and addressing the gentleman in the high chair, said,

'Mr Limbkins, I beg your pardon, sir! Oliver Twist has asked for more!' There was a general start. Horror was depicted on every countenance.

'For *more*!' said Mr Limbkins. 'Compose yourself, Bumble, and answer me distinctly. Do I understand that he asked for more, after he had eaten the supper allotted by the dietary?'

'He did, sir,' replied Bumble.

'That boy will be hung,' said the gentleman in the white waistcoat; 'I know that boy will be hung.'

Nobody controverted the prophetic gentleman's opinion. An animated discussion took place. Oliver was ordered into instant confinement; and a bill was next morning pasted on the outside of the gate, offering a reward of five pounds to anybody who would take Oliver Twist off the hands of the parish. In other words, five pounds and Oliver Twist were offered to any man or woman who wanted an apprentice to any trade, business, or calling.

AUTHOR FILE

NAME: Charles John Huffam Dickens
BORN: 7 February 1812 in Portsmouth, England
DIED: 9 June 1870 in Gad's Hill, Kent, England (but he is buried in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey)
NATIONALITY: English
LIVED: mainly in and around London
MARRIED: to Catherine (Kate) Thomson Hogarth, in 1836; separated 1858
CHILDREN: ten: Charles, Mary, Kate, Walter, Francis, Alfred, Sydney, Henry, Dora and Edward

What was he like?
Charles was a man who was always on the go. He rarely missed a deadline or let his fans down, and managed to do this without ever becoming boring. Funny and a great entertainer, he loved playing with children and had many friends.

Where did he grow up?
All over south and south-east England. Charles's father was a clerk in the navy and was often transferred from place to place in the course of his work.

Unfortunately for Charles and his seven brothers and sisters, their father was extremely bad with money. When Charles was twelve, his father was thrown into prison for not paying debts. Charles was taken out of school and sent to work in a filthy, rat-infested factory. Although he went back to school after just a few months, it was an experience he never forgot.

Charles left school when he was just fifteen to start work in a lawyer's office. As soon as he began, though, Charles knew that it wasn't for him – he found the office so boring that he spent his time dropping cherry stones on to the heads of passers-by from the window! So he used his knowledge of the law to start reporting on court cases. From there he began selling stories to newspapers and magazines, and when a selection of these were printed as a book, his career as a novelist began.

What did he do apart from writing books?
Alongside writing novels, Charles continued to work as a journalist. When he was older, he achieved great fame for giving readings from his books to huge audiences. These made him rich, but also exhausted him. Some people believe that doing too many readings sent Charles to an early grave.

***Where did he get the idea for* Oliver Twist?**
Partly from his own experience of being sent out to work, and partly from all the court cases involving vagabonds, thieves and murderers he had reported on.

What did people think of* Oliver Twist *when it was first published in 1837–9?
Oliver Twist was first published in monthly instalments, like all of Charles's books. It was a great success – people talked about what might happen next, just as people talk about television serials today. Many people, though, were shocked by the descriptions of poverty and crime, and people in the Jewish community were also offended by the character of Fagin.

How big was London in Charles Dickens's day?
It was the biggest city in the world, and it was growing at an incredible pace. In 1800 the population was around 1 million; at the time the first instalment of *Oliver Twist* was published in 1837 it was about 2 million; and by the time Charles Dickens died in 1870 it was over 3 million. Today, over 7 million people live in London, but there are many bigger cities, some with populations of over 15 million.

***Were conditions in Victorian London really as bad as they seem in* Oliver Twist?**
Yes. London simply couldn't cope with the number of people living in it, and poor people lived in unbelievably overcrowded, dirty housing. There were no proper toilets and no sewers. Human waste ran into stinking, often overflowing cesspools or even in open drains along the street. Because of this, diseases such as cholera were rife. It was hard for a poor family to come by enough food, and the food that was available was often bad quality (sometimes even containing poisonous substances) and not varied enough to give people the nutrition they needed.

Children suffered the worst – almost half the funerals in London in the 1830s were of children under ten. School was neither free nor compulsory, and many children were working before they were five years old. Even if they had time to play, there was usually nowhere to play except the local garbage heap, and of course there was no money for toys. There were no laws to protect children, and they could even be sold by

their parents – if they were lucky enough to have parents. Tens of thousands of orphans lived on the streets, trying to get by as best they could.

Would being a rich child in Victorian London have been very different to being poor?

It would have been infinitely better than being poor, but by modern standards still not all that great. Rich children had a good, varied diet, plenty of toys including dolls and train sets, and comfortable houses with heating and gas light. If your family had money, London was also an exciting place to live, with lots of entertainment and always something new to do.

Nevertheless, compared to today, even rich children didn't have an easy time of it. They were still vulnerable to disease: life expectancy even for the very richest people was much lower than today. And rich children could be abused by adults just as much as poor ones.

Why didn't anyone do anything about the situation?

People tried, among them Charles Dickens himself. There were many charities that tried to help, for example the 'Ragged Schools' set up to educate very poor children for free. And, gradually, over the course of the 1800s, improvements such as modern sewerage systems were introduced, and laws were passed to protect children and get them into schools, prevent child labour and limit the hours that adults worked. The problems London faced, though, were huge, and it wasn't until the end of the 1800s that real, lasting improvements in the life of poor Londoners began to come about.

ague – a feverish shivering fit

antimonial – a medicine containing the metal antimony, often used to make people sick

approver – someone who gives evidence in court against their previous accomplices in crime

battledore – a sort of small racket, used to play a game like badminton

belcher – a particular type of (usually blue and white) neckerchief, named after a famous boxer called Jim Belcher

blucher – a shoe or boot

bombazeen – a material a bit like corduroy

breeches – old-fashioned, formal shorts, worn by men

calico – cotton

cant terms – slang

centre-bit – a tool used to make circular holes, often used by burglars

chandler – this could mean either a candlemaker's shop or a general store

clasp knife – a knife with a blade that folds into the handle

coal-whippers – someone who unloads coal from a ship

cocked hat – a triangular hat with the brim bent upwards (in a traditional pirate costume, the hat is a cocked hat)

copper – a large copper pan

Court Guide – a directory containing the names of all the people who had been presented to Queen Victoria

cove, covey – mate, bloke, guy, dude, etc.

crape – a type of thin material with a crinkled surface, usually black and often used when people were in mourning

crib – a cottage or house

Daffy – 'Daffy's elixir salutis', a famous medicine often given to children, which was probably completely useless

dark lantern – a type of lantern which could be slid shut to hide the light inside, also called a 'darky' (plural, 'darkies')

Day and Martin – a brand of shoe polish

to dodge – to avoid someone or something; *or* to follow someone stealthily

drab – a prostitute

finger-post – an old-fashioned signpost with arms pointing in different directions

fogle-hunter – a 'fogle' was a silk handkerchief; a 'fogle-hunter' was slang for a pickpocket

fustian – a thick, coarse type of cloth

gaiters – a covering worn around the ankle and lower leg to protect clothes from splashes of mud, etc.

gig – a small carriage drawn by just one horse

grazier – someone who works raising cattle

gruel – a thin soup made by boiling oatmeal

hack(ney) cabriolet – a horse-drawn taxi

hones – special stones used for sharpening knives

hoptalmy – an eye infection

hostler – a groom at an inn

indenture – the special contract which an apprentice signs

Jack Ketch – a slang term for 'hangman'

jorum – a large cup or jug

(to) lag (someone) – to arrest or send someone to prison

laudanum – a liquid prepared from the dangerous and addictive drug opium, used as a medicine

(to be on the) lay – to be going about your business

(to give someone) leg-bail – to run away from someone

life-preserver – a stick with some lead added, used as a weapon

merino – a type of wool

mountebank – a travelling entertainer, who might also sell medicines of dubious quality

nankeen – a pale yellow cloth

Newgate Calendar – a popular book which was basically a big list of convicted criminals, their sentences and crimes

oakum – a material made by untwisting old rope ('picking oakum'), and used to stuff into cracks to (e.g.) help make a ship watertight

ostler – *see* hostler

parish – the local government body, responsible for maintaining roads, raising fighting men (if needed) and helping poor people

paviour – someone who lays pavements for a living

pedlar – someone who sells goods door to door

pewter – a metal alloy (i.e., a mixture) of tin and copper

plant – a burglary, con trick or other illegal act

plummy and slam – this phrase doesn't really mean anything; it's just a password that Fagin's gang use

porringer – a small bowl

porter – a sort of beer

post-chaise – a carriage hired from a company that also provided fresh horses at regular intervals, making it (by 1830s standards) a fast way to travel round the country

prad – a horse

quartern loaf – a standard size of loaf

shaver – a joker

slops – a weak, tasteless soup or drink often fed to invalids

smalls – *see* breeches

smock-frock – a piece of traditional British men's country clothing, like a loose, long shirt or coat

spring-gun – a special type of gun which fires when the trigger is just lightly touched

stage-coach – a public coach with a set timetable

Stamp-office – a government department which collected taxes on goods

stipendiary – someone who gets a salary from a part of the government, or from a church

Stone Jug – slang for prison

strop – a piece of (usually) leather, used to sharpen razors on

stuff – a woollen material

swipes – weak beer

(to) transport someone – to deport them to another country. In Charles Dickens's time, many criminals were transported to Australia, sometimes for very minor crimes

turnpike – a gate across a road at which tolls had to be paid

waiter – a small tray

washball – a ball of soap

workhouse – an institution set up to assist people who were poor, unemployed, too old, too young or too ill to work

worsted – a woollen material