

looked slowly around him, and listened carefully, he gently undid the bolts and chains on the door and glanced outside.

It was a cold, dark night. There was no wind, and the dark shadows thrown by the trees on the ground looked frightening. He closed the door again, tied up the few articles of clothing he had, and sat down on a bench to wait for morning.

With the first light that struggled through the windows, Oliver rose and again unlocked the door. After a brief pause in the doorway, he stepped outside, closed the door behind him and was in the open street.

Chapter 6 The Artful Dodger

By eight o'clock Oliver was nearly five miles away from the town, but he ran for a time and then hid for a while in case he was being pursued. Then he sat down to rest beside a milestone and began to think, for the first time, where he could go.

The milestone told him, in big letters, that he was now seventy miles from London. The name fixed in his mind and gave him a new idea. London! The big city! Nobody could ever find him there! He had often heard the old men in the workhouse, too, say that no lad with spirit would find it difficult to earn his living in London. As these thoughts passed through his mind, he jumped to his feet and continued walking.

Oliver walked twenty miles that day, and all that time tasted nothing but a piece of dry bread. When night came, he turned into a field, and soon fell asleep.

He felt cold and stiff when he got up the next morning, and so hungry that he had to spend the only penny he had on a small loaf. Another night passed in the cold air made him worse, and when he set out on his journey the next morning, he could hardly move.

He continued in this way for six days, begging at cottage doors in the villages where it was not forbidden to beg. Early on the seventh morning after he had left his home town, he walked slowly and painfully into a little place called Barnet. The streets were empty; not a soul had woken to begin the business of the day. The sun was rising in all its beauty, but the light only served to show the boy his loneliness as he sat, with bleeding feet and covered with dust, on a doorstep.

He had been sitting on the doorstep for some time when he noticed that a boy who had passed him some minutes before had returned and was now looking at him closely from the opposite side of the street. After a while the boy crossed over and, walking up close to Oliver, said: 'Hullo! What's the trouble?'

The boy who addressed Oliver in this manner was about his own age, but one of the strangest-looking boys Oliver had ever seen. He was a dirty little boy, but he appeared to have all the manners of a man. He was short for his age, with sharp, ugly little eyes. His hat was stuck on the top of his head so lightly that it threatened to fall off at any moment. He wore a man's coat, which reached nearly to his heels. He had turned the arms back so that he could put his hands in his trouser pockets. He was, all in all, as proud and confident a young gentleman as ever stood four feet six, or something less.

'I am very hungry and tired,' replied Oliver, with tears in his eyes as he spoke. 'I have walked a long way. I have been walking for seven days.'

'Walking for seven days!' said the young gentleman. 'You want some food, and you shall have it. I am a poor boy myself, but I have a coin or two and I'll pay. Get up and come with me.'

Helping Oliver to rise, this young man took him to a neighbouring shop, where he bought him some meat and a big loaf of bread. Then he took him to a small public house, where a pot of beer was brought to him.