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The Artful Dodgers: Chapter 1

October, 1837.

Bet sat at the dressing table with the elaborate red velvet dress hanging beside it. There were holes in the greying, frayed petticoat caused by the boned corset within the dress. Nodding towards it, she instructed Esther to brush it down. The sisters didn’t speak as Esther did as she was directed. Satisfied that the velvet was dust free, Bet reached for the hair brush and passed it to Esther who dutifully began brushing and pinning Bet’s hair into place.

Bet looked into the mirror, staring at Esther intently, just as she did each night when this ritual was performed. She noted the similarities in their heart-shaped faces; their large eyes the same shade of green and the identical ash coloured ringlets which she wanted to believe they had inherited from their mother. Their mouths were different. Esther’s was full and pretty whilst Bet’s was narrow and pale. Bet made the most of her thin lips by painting them with cochineal balm to emphasise a harsh, bright line making her look older and sterner than she actually was. Bet remained still as Esther pinned her hair. Once it was in place, she sent Esther from the room to ensure that any boys not working were in their dormitories or out for the evening. She then began to apply the painted mask that she would wear until the last punter left. She started with a white wax and almond oil paste which she smeared onto her face and down her neck until the pale hue was even before brushing a mix of rice powder and zinc oxide over the paste. Picking up the bottle of castor oil, she dabbed her finger across the top of the bottle and gently applied it to her eyelids giving them a slight shine. She then dipped her finger into the cracked rouge pot and carefully rubbed it across her cheek bones. Checking the mirror, she reached for the beeswax and daubed it across her thin lips, followed by the carmine balm.

Staring at her reflection to ensure she looked every bit the Madam of the house - a role that she was only just beginning to feel comfortable with - she took the dress and began to step into it.

As she dressed she looked around the room. Her eyes fell on the bed which until recently she had mostly shared with her sister, though she was now increasingly spending her nights in Dodger’s bed. Much as the class of this boarding house was higher than she was used to, the simplicity of her previous lodgings appealed to her. There she was responsible only for the safety of herself and her sister. Here the weight of her burden was far greater.

Once the transformation was complete, she sat at the dressing table taking in the sight which still surprised her. Knowing that this was only part of the persona, she took a deep breath, narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips, accentuating the brash stare which served as a warning to the punters that she was no flat. She began to run through the usual moves which she would no doubt encounter from the punters that evening. There was always the attempt not to pay and she went through the threats in her head which she knew she could carry out. It was while she was holding the silent conversations in the mirror that there was a rap at the front door.

Bet rose from the dressing table and headed downstairs noticing Esther standing at parlour door where she had been playing three card brag with the lads who were working that evening.

“Who’s there?” Bet demanded in the authoritarian tone she adopted for the punters.

A deep, unfamiliar voice snapped back, “Open the door quickly, mistress. I’ll not be thankful for any gentleman knowing that I bring business here!”

“I should like a name from you, all the same, Sir, and shan’t unbolt the door without one.”

“You are aware of my purpose here and will be happy to take my money once my business is complete. Morrice, Madam, or I shall find a catamite in the street.”

The man’s words satisfied Bet as to his purpose and she gestured to Esther to prepare the boys. She unbolted the door and ushered the thick set man into the house, assessing his large frame as she did so.

“I shall take your coat, Sir,” she said smiling and putting out her hand towards the heavy-swell woollen frock coat which appeared to weigh heavy on one side.

The man’s eyes grew wide, “Thank you, no, Mistress. I will keep my belongings with me. May I see the boys?”

Bet began to feel uneasy. She knew that most punters liked to keep personal effects about them whilst using the facilities but there was something about the manner in which this man carried himself that set her on edge. She eyed the odd way in which his coat framed him and made a guess as to what weight would make it sit so – as well as the threat it might pose.

“I shall need to know your intention with my lads, Sir, as well as proof that you are able to pay.”

Although smiling, the man’s eye twitched. Bet saw this as a sign of mistrust and knew that when suspicious, men who called upon the services of houses such as this reacted unpredictably. The thought set her on edge though she suppressed the urge to act too soon. The man took a step towards the parlour and without hesitation, Bet lunged toward the door, pulling out the blade which she had kept about her since she had worked the street.

“One more step, Sir, and I shall show you a small portion of the protection that these boys know. I am the Mistress of this house and the Master is but a holler away. He would not think twice about showing your head a barker if he found your manner towards me or our lads to be anything but friendly.”

The man stopped dead in his tracks. “Mistress, you have me wrong! I am merely here to purchase the services of one of your lads.”

Bet remained in position, blade in hand. There was an air about this man she couldn’t fathom and she felt the need to show him that neither she, nor this establishment was to be underestimated. She lowered her voice.

“Your ability to pay, Sir?”

Without taking his eyes from the blade, he reached into his pocket. He pulled out a few shillings and placed them upon the desk beside the parlour door. She had calculated the sum before his hand had left it.

“What is it that you intend this amount to buy, Sir?”

“A boy to kneel before me and take me in his mouth. Would you show me your boys, Madam?”

Knowing his intention eased Bet’s mind and she reached for the door knob leaving the blade in full view of the man. In the parlour, Esther fussed behind the four boys of varying sizes, each dressed in their smartest togs standing side by side. The man quickly scanned them; his eyes settling on Edward.

“What age are you, younker?”

Edward confidently stepped forward. “Six, Sir”.

The man’s lips curled at the corners. “I shall take this one.”

Bet looked to Esther and without any outward sign of alarm, blinked quickly at her three times.

“Esther, take the boy and the gentleman to room three.”

Torn by her desire to tell the man that Edward was no longer available and her need to display an outward calm, Bet watched the man closely as he followed Esther and Edward up the stairs. She watched from the bottom as Esther opened the door and showed the two in. The man kicked the door shut too quickly for Esther who was almost hit by it. Her eyes darted to Bet who furiously gestured her downstairs. Bet hissed, “Go and wake Dodger. Tell ‘im to be tooled.”

Esther scuttled to the room behind the kitchen where Dodger slept. Bet entered the parlour where the boys had returned to their card game.

“Charlie, get up to room ‘free and keep an ear on what’s occurring in there. There’s some’fin’ rum about that covey. Don’t let ‘im know you’re there.”

Charlie nodded and crept up the stairs, avoiding those he knew to creak. As he did so, a heavy scraping sound came from room three. Bet froze as she heard a heavy thud against the door. A fear gripped her. She instinctively knew that Edward was in danger. She looked to Charlie for confirmation then sped down the hall to Dodger’s room where she found Esther shaking him awake. She pulled her out of the way.

“Esther, get up there and do the check! Dodge, we got a file up there wiv’ Edward. Some’fin’s amiss. Bring the persuader.”

Bet picked up the neddy which was resting against the wall beside the bed. Pulling on his trousers, Dodger followed her out of the room, persuader in hand. As they ran along the corridor, they heard Esther knocking and trying the jammed door of room three, asking if all was well. Bet’s heart raced as she felt an overwhelming need to see the boy and know he was safe. Edward shouted from behind the door but was cut short. Dodger ran up the stairs and pushed Esther and Charlie from the doorway. He slammed the persuader against the door.

“Kinchin, you shout to me and tell me all is well in there!”

There was a crash against the inside of the door followed by a muffled yelp. Bet’s heart froze with fear as Dodger began to shoulder the door, shouting to Edward as he did.

“I’m coming in there, my boy. You can ‘ear me, can’t ya? I’ll be in before ya know it!”

Bet joined Dodger, kicking the door and hitting it with the neddy.

They could hear the man, snarling and grunting from inside the room.

The other boys came from the parlour to see what the commotion was about. Upon seeing Bet and Dodger so distressed, they scrambled up the stairs to assist.

Bet joined Dodger in the doorway so they were shoulder to shoulder and gestured to Charlie to follow suit. Desperate to get into the room, she shouted above the pandemonium with as much confidence as she could muster, “After ‘free! One, two, ‘free!”

The three of them shouldered the door which opened slightly but was being pushed against from the inside. Bet was struggling with her need to see the little boy behind the door and tears welled in her eyes. “One, two ‘free!” The door shifted but was again pushed closed.

As the three continued to attempt to get into the room, Yuller and Fletcher began shouting towards the heavy wooden door, “We’re nearly in Ed! You’ll be prayin’ for the mill when we get in there, covey!”

“Shut it!” Bet screeched, realising that she could no longer hear Edward.

After several more attempts, the door gave way and before it could be slammed shut again, Dodger wedged the persuader into the gap. He, Bet, Esther and the boys ran at it. Squeezing through the door, Dodger clambered over the heavy double wash stand which had been placed behind the door. The man was fastening the front of his trousers with bloodied hands, sneering at his handiwork. Now inside, Bet scanned the room for the boy who was making no sound. At the foot of the bed, she saw the swollen, bleeding face of Edward. His tiny legs displayed the red and white marks of a fresh lathering. Tearing her skirts for ease of movement, she leapt to where he lay, motionless and naked from the waist down. It was then that she saw the blood and she saw the tear. She also saw what had been weighing down the man’s coat, a truncheon, glimmering crimson and lying on the floor a few yards from the boy.

As Esther and the boys began jostling through the gap in the door, the strapping man easily pushed the wash stand between himself and those fighting their way in. Having surveyed the scene, Charlie grabbed the persuader and sprang across the stand. Dodger vaulted to Charlie’s aid. The other boys had seen the danger that the large man posed and also ran to assist Charlie. Charlie landed a strike upon the man’s shoulder but lost his balance, allowing the man to grab him by the scruff of his neck. Dodger pulled Charlie from the man’s grip as Yuller and Fletch jumped him with fists flying. The force pushed the man backwards and he stumbled. At once, the boys were on him. Yuller clawed at the man’s face and pushed his fingers into the man’s eyes. Sweeping up the fallen cosh, Dodger quickly slammed it

against the man’s rising arm as the boys lashed out, kicking, punching and biting the man’s torso. The man tried to struggle free but Dodger and the boys worked together to keep him down, repeatedly landing blows on his head and body with such aim that he began to slip from consciousness. The boys continued to beat him, Charlie spitting and Fletcher crying.

At the foot of the bed, Bet and Esther were turning Edward on his side. Esther supported Edward’s back as Bet pulled a rag from half way down his throat. Attempting to block out the turn-up, she listened for the child’s breath. It was faint and uneven, but it was there.

The Artful Dodgers: Chapter 2

May, 1837.

The courtroom was lit through the filthy, lofty windows allowing in the minimum of spring daylight which sat in patches on the dusty wooden floor boards. Dodger stood tall in the witness box as he answered to the charges brought against him.

“I, Sir, am a gentleman and understand that an item of such craftsmanship would be sought after. I ‘ave long possessed the cigarette case in question which the gentleman ‘ere,” Dodger waved his hand dismissively at the previous owner of the silver case, “as mistakenly identified as his own.”

The man was outraged and began to splutter about the engraved initials within the case. Dodger took a small delight in the beak ordering silence. Once the accuser had been brought to order, the magistrate picked up on his point.

“How do you explain the initials within the box, Mister Dawkins, since your own do not match those engraved?”

“Well, Sir, I do believe that this ‘ook is taking advantage of the fortuitous coincidence that ‘is own initials do indeed match those of my departed benefactor, Mr Cornelius Riddleton. As I no longer ‘ave the guidance of the upstanding Mr Riddleton, it would be easy to cast aspersions upon an unsponsored wretch such as myself ‘oo would be easily disposed of, and the last item I ‘ave to remember my kindly old friend could then be claimed as ‘is own. It is not I, Sir, ‘oo should be under suspicion ‘ere but the blackguard ‘oo, wi’vout the discernment and accurate judgement of the fine people ‘ere in this courtroom would almost certainly ‘ave succeeded in ‘is terrible plot.”

He had portrayed himself with humour and foxed the clerk as well as some of those who came to revel in the fates of the unfortunates finding themselves before the beak. He was pleased that despite being presented with witnesses, he had created through his clever repartee, a question as to his guilt. This, however, did not change the fact that he was sentenced to lagging for life. Dodger’s moment in front of the magistrate had gone exactly as he had expected it to.

He believed that the cigarette case was his own. If the codger was so green as to allow him access to it then he didn’t deserve to keep it. Dodger would only part company with an item of such finery if he was getting a fair and reasonable offer for it - or if it brought extra privileges with Fagin.

As he was led from the courtroom, he did not stop his tirade of threats to those who held him captive.

“When the Secretary of State for the ‘Ome Affairs ‘ears of this, ‘e’ll be furious, I tell ya. Jumping this high in front of ya when it reaches ‘is ears that you have wrongly taken Mr Jack Dawkins into custody!”

As he gesticulated for the benefit of the jailer who was holding him, Dodger was carefully taking in every iron door, grey wall and dark corridor, hoping to plan a way out of this less than desirable predicament. He was led with force to a cell and thrown into the small, insalubrious room with a grunt from the jailer.

“This will not be left out of my report, good sir. I shall be including this brutal treatment of a gentleman and see you not only stripped of your post but of your freedom! I shall testify against you myself!”

The door slammed with Dodger still shouting towards it, only stopping when a gruff voice behind him spat, “Stop yer ‘ollerin’ flat!”

Dodger turned to see a man he assumed to be in his mid-twenties laid on one of the two wooden cots, his tremendous feet hanging over the edge and his face contorted in anger at the disturbance. He began to rise from the cot which creaked beneath his bulk. Dodger assessed his size and made an instant evaluation of his weak points. His muscular legs showed evidence of the rickets and his rounded shoulders meant that his head hung forward from his thick neck. Dodger would rely on the titan’s lack of speed in the event of a barney.

“I ‘ave it peaceful-like in ‘ere, do you ‘ear me? I don’t want you in ‘ere but if we’re quoddin’ together, you need to understand how I ‘ave it.”

Dodger looked to the man’s great fists which he knew could pound him like the rocks beneath the treadmill if he was to catch him. He bristled at the veiled threat.

“I’ll not be in long enough to get under your feet so you can keep yer Fee-Faw-Fum for the next covey that lands.”

“I’ll show you Fee-Faw-Fum when I’m making an assortment of yer ‘ead, lad!”

“Good Sir, I don’t believe there is any call for ‘freats. This gammon will all be over and done before they bring the regimentals.”

“Gammon, lad? I suppose you are innocent of all charges against you?”

“Indeed I am. I should not be detained in this establishment and my release will come about forthwith. I am simply awaiting the beak to realise ‘is mistake and you need not be further inconvenienced by my presence.”

“I’ve been waiting for that same ‘fing for some months and I’ll pound a magpie that the day will not come, now stow, lad.”

“Ah, you too are innocent! What is your name, my fine fellow?”

The man looked to Dodger with narrowed eyes. “My name is not your business and if you ‘ave any sense you will leave me to my thoughts.”

It occurred to Dodger that if he were out on the streets he would find out the man’s name easily, with or without his consent, as well as the reason for his occupation in the Stone Jug. It was then that the reality of being a transport began to sink in. He sat on the spare cot and thought about what he was leaving behind. Fagin would continue to provide bed and board for the lads and Nancy never left it long between visits. Even Bill, for all his bluster, would never see the lads without. Charlie would be fine. He’d learned most of Dodger’s tricks over the years and was a reasonable teacher for the youngers. Yuller, again would be fine. Ephraim was a worry as his ‘cock o’ the walk’ mouth might land him in bother but anything Dodger did to knock it out of him only led to him behaving in the same manner only with more secrecy. The younger ones, Baxter, Wiley, Ebbe, Fletcher and Edward would be cared for as Nancy would make sure of it. In fact, he wondered what he did bring to the gang other than a top-sawyer technique and a plummy turn of phrase. Fagin would miss him though and he felt this deeply. The ancient file was getting older and his cunning could only keep the wolves from the door for so long. Bill wouldn’t spit on him if he was ablaze and Nancy held a deep-rooted resentment. It was only the lads (and Bill’s instructions to collect blunt) which kept her visiting.

His thoughts were interrupted by the uncomfortable feeling of being watched. The large man was sat up on his cot, his eyes fixed on Dodger.

“I am well aware that my good looks and prime attire are worth a second glance my good man, but the length of time you appear to have been taking me in suggests there’s more to your interest than my swell.”

The man clenched his fists and set his jaw. “What do you mean, prig?”

“Prig? You make assumptions which are unfounded and ‘ole’eartedly refuted!”

“My assumptions are never far wrong and if you are no fogle-‘unter, then you are a catamite!”

“You, Sir, may wish I was!”

The man, incensed at the suggestion, jumped from his cot and ran at Dodger though succeeded only in falling into the door of the cell as Dodger swerved beneath his great arms.

He turned to Dodger who was leaning against the opposite wall, smirking at the clumsy attempt. This further infuriated him and he again lunged at Dodger who skilfully weaved to escape his clutches.

This happened several more times with the man becoming increasingly angry and out of breath whilst Dodger, though realising that the state of affairs was becoming perilous, mocked him. It was only the cell door being unlocked and opened which put a stop to the debacle.

“Dawkins! There’s a gentleman ‘ere to speak with you. Look lively. McCord! Settle down and let the lad pass or you’ll be on the treadmill.”

Dodger sidled past him, relieved at this unexpected turn of good fortune which allowed him to retain the façade that he was in total control of the situation. McCord barged

his shoulder and spat, “We’ll see ‘ow well-plucked you are when they bring you back ‘ere to me.”

Once outside the cell with the door closed, Dodger shouted in to McCord, attempting to cover the sound of his heart pounding, “I’m out of ‘ere, McCord but if you’d like me to show you up when they let you out, ‘ead to Clerkenwell and ask anyone where The Artful Dodger lives.”

The same jailer who had brought Dodger to the cell now led him down a number of grey corridors and eventually up a set of curved stone steps. At the top of the steps was a large wooden door which the jailer unlocked. The pair walked into a spacious area where the surroundings looked like some of the heavy-swell plants that Dodger had helped Bill Sykes to flimp. Dodger realised that the sensation of danger which he had felt on some of the early jobs with Bill was almost exactly the same as the one he had been experiencing before the jailer had rescued him from the cell with McCord.

He looked around the room to see several pieces of neatly arranged, ornate furniture. There were portraits of stern-looking gentlemen upon the walls and windows which let in a glorious light that Dodger felt confident he would soon be feeling upon his face.

Ahead of them was another door which the jailer knocked upon. When called to enter, the jailer gripped Dodger’s upper arm and led him into a room much smaller, though as opulently adorned as the last.

“Dawkins, Sir.”

A weasly-faced man sporting a dowager’s hump sat at a great mahogany desk.

“Ah, Dawkins. Step forward. Timms, you may wait outside.”

Dodger did as he was asked. Once Timms had left the room, Dodger confidently nodded to the man.

“I assume, Sir, that you ‘ave realised the mistake that ‘as been made ‘ere today and you wish to release me forthwith.”

The man smiled and rose from his chair. “I do wish to release you, Dawkins. That is a fact. Your transportation papers can be withdrawn this very day. I have but a small favour to ask in return.”

Dodger’s initial delight was dampened. The words that the man used, coupled with his wry smile reminded Dodger of the way Fagin tricked fences when he needed a quick separation from hot swag. “Sir?”

“You see, Dawkins, I need some information about a certain... Jew that I am led to believe that you consider to be... an associate of yours.”

Dodger’s heart began to race. The very intimation at Fagin made Dodger uncomfortable. He was conscious that his reaction may have given away his thoughts. Any retort now would need to throw this man away from the suspicion that they were acquaintances. “A Jew, sir? I associate with none so low as an Ikey! I ‘ave a reputation in this area!”

“You do indeed, Dawkins; a reputation that could be beneficial to both of us, if applied correctly.”

Dodger felt ill at ease. He wondered how this man, about whom he knew nothing, seemed to know of his associate. His mind raced as to what information this man might want from him. He certainly knew enough to see Fagin swing. Just a little of the knowledge he

held would see to that, but he was no gossip. Giving nothing away, he looked the man in the eye.

“When shall I be released, good Sir? I ‘ave wasted enough time ‘ere already and I wish to get back.”

“Back to what, Dawkins? To thieving and lying and a host of other skulduggery, I should wager. No, lad. I have a proposition for you. If I am to prevent your transportation and allow you back onto my streets, you are to work for me.”

“Work for you, Sir? As what?”

“As an informant.”

Dodger’s face drained as the realisation of what was being asked of him dawned. This was it. The moment Fagin had trained him for all of his life. He was being asked to play booty and his reactions could give him away at any moment. Just as his heart had stopped racing from his ordeal with McCord, this line of questioning made it pound once more.

“If you know me as you claim to, Sir, then you will know that I cannot and will not do as you ask.”

“You are not thinking of what is at stake here, Dawkins. If transported, you shall need more than any reputation to prove your worth.”

“I am a resourceful fellow, Sir, and my wits ‘ave gotten me through life very well until this unfortunate misunderstanding. I shall be transported and hold up my ‘ead rather than split upon those who would break it. The reputation I ‘old is that of an honourable gentleman, Sir, and a great deal it took to obtain.”

“Honourable among the dippers and the busters and the prostitutes? That is no honour at all!”

“Perhaps in your world, Sir, honour has a different meaning to that in mine. I shall not peach on those that ‘ave shown me friendship, loyalty and kindness.”

“Ah, yes, Dawkins. Kindness. That is what you feel you have been shown. How exactly did you fall into the company of the Jew? At what age was this friendship offered to you?”

“Why, Sir, you appear to be asking questions to which you need no reply. I know not any other life than the one Fagin ‘as given me. I ‘ave been fed, clothed and kept out of the work’ouse which is a fine sight more than many.”

The man’s line of questioning prompted him to try and remember a time before he was in Fagin’s company but the memory evaded him. He had never had the conversation as to how Fagin had found him. He had assumed that his entry into the gang had come about in the way he had recruited others. He remembered nothing of his own procurement though the manner in which he found new members rarely waivered. He would look out for those who wandered alone and were young enough to be re-educated into the ways of the gang. The more bedraggled and hungry they looked, the easier it was to gain their trust with a mere promise of a meal and a bed.

Any talk of life before the gang was not tolerated by Fagin who seemed to take it as a slight upon the efforts he made to provide food, shelter and guidance.

“What do you know of your parentage, Dawkins?”

“I know that I was not cared for enough by my parents for them to do what Fagin ‘as done for me. I do not wish to speak of this further. Thank you for your offer, Sir, but I shall find another means of securing my release.”

“Do not be so hasty as to side with a fence who deals in fancy work and who appears to have told you nothing of your past.”

“Nobody knows anything of my past, Sir, including you, and that is ‘ow it will remain. May I be allowed back to my cell now?”

“Indeed, Dawkins. Indeed. I will however, be postponing your transportation for three days, after which we shall speak again, and if your answer remains the same, you shall be on the boat that very same day. Until we meet again, Dawkins. Timms!”

At the call, Timms returned to the room to lead Dodger back to the cell. Dodger’s thoughts about the proposition swam in his head. Did the rat-faced man know more about him than he knew himself, or was it a trick to earwig Dodger into his plan? Either way, he knew that in three days’ time, his answer would remain the same.

The Artful Dodgers – Chapter 3

May, 1837.

Timms accompanied Dodger down the stairs and along the corridors towards the cell.

“McCord will be pleased to ‘ave his cellmate back.”

Dodger laughed. “That pumblechook’d ‘ave to be earlier than the Knocker-up to catch me!”

“Watch yourself with that one, lad. He ain’t in the Stone Jug for being a Coffee-Sister.”

Dodger fell silent. He knew that his refusal to peach meant he would be in McCord’s company for at least the next three days and he would need to be on his toes until then.

When Timms unlocked the cell, McCord was back on his cot, snoring loudly. Dodger gingerly took the opposite cot and contemplated resting whilst McCord was asleep. As the cell door was locked, Dodger glanced towards McCord, paying particular attention to the rhythm of his breath. Satisfied that he was deep in slumber, Dodger sat on the cot with his back against the wall. He began to reflect upon the words of the weasly-faced man and wondered how he knew so much of his association with Fagin; Fagin, who was always careful as to who knew of his business. If this gentleman was aware of how Fagin supported himself and the lads, why would he need Dodger to blow upon him? He smiled to himself, proud that he had behaved exactly as Fagin would have wished. He closed his eyes without changing his upright position so as to be able to leap if McCord awoke, and allowed himself a light kip.

He woke to McCord’s hot, foul breath in his face but before he could escape, McCord clutched his neck and straddled the lad. Pinned against the wall, his eyes darted around the cell, frantically looking for a means to give leg-bail to McCord’s grip.

“So, you didn’t skip out then, fogle-‘unter? I waited for you to get back so you could show me up.”

McCord tightened his grip, smiling as Dodger’s face reddened. Dodger tried to pull the hands from his throat, writhing between McCord’s muscular thighs in an attempt to get free.

“Since I’ll miss the pleasure of seein’ you scragged, I reckon I’ll save Jack Ketch the bovver’ an’ do you in myself.” McCord threw back his head, releasing a wild, maniacal rumble from his throat. As Dodger fought for breath, his sight began to blur. His heart pounding, Dodger realised that he could not escape.

As he lost all strength to struggle, large black spots exploded in front of his eyes, his vision was lost and all went dark.

Dodger awoke in the infirmary, unaware of how long he had been there. His sight was blurred. Attempting to lift his head, he found himself completely immobile. The distorted vision caused him to reclose his eyes as he tried to make sense of the situation. The pounding he had received at McCord’s hand was all too vivid and his flesh felt as though he was still taking delivery of it. He genuinely had not expected to wake so the pain he felt all over his body was bitter sweet. He couldn’t recall how he had escaped the cell and the wrath of McCord but he wondered if the injuries that the Goliath-formed man had inflicted would buy him more time before transportation, allowing him to hatch a plan to secure his release.

He heard footsteps approaching his bed.

“I see that you are alive, Dawkins.”

His eyes darted to the voice. Despite his unclear vision he could make out the weasly-faced man who was stood with his arms behind his back, beneath the prominent hump. He leaned over Dodger so that he could see him better. Dodger noticed he was carrying a newspaper. He could only just make it out between the man’s crossed hands as he bent.

“I no longer require your services, lad. The Jew hanged yesterday.”

Dodger’s eyes grew wide. Although sceptical about what the man was saying he couldn’t help but wonder why he would use such an extreme tactic to get information, and surely saying Fagin was dead was making the whole point of peaching on him futile – unless he was hoping to use his own emotions against him in an attempt to make him share memories that could incriminate Fagin. Even then, why would the man assume that he would confide in him? He decided that his own tactic would be to get as much information from the man as possible before he afforded him any visible reaction.

“Hanged? For what crime?”

“Conspiracy to murder. Some prostitute under his tutelage. Nancy Something or Other.”

Dodger was upset at the lack of respect he used when speaking of his Nancy. The woman who taught him compassion in the face of apathy as well as why it was important that he carry himself with dignity at all times. It was she who shaped and encouraged the element of Dodger which he was most proud of and well known for: his gentlemanly intellect.

“Sykes. Nancy Sykes. She called ‘erself by Bill’s name. Made ‘er feel respectable-like.”

Dodger’s voice trailed off, realising that he was allowing the man to draw him into whatever game it was that he was playing. Had he just incriminated himself, Fagin, Nancy and Bill? He grounded himself by remembering that this could be a move to catch him out.

“No doubt, no doubt,” replied the man. “I should have wished that they rest eternally together but as she died at Sykes’ hand, I do not believe...”

“She died at Sykes’ ‘and?” Dodger cut in. “How? Please, Sir, do not toy with me. If what you say is true, I must know the ‘ole tale.”

The man dropped his head. “I do not lie about this matter, Dawkins. The news has been in the London Standard and the Dispatch. I have saved them for you to look at yourself.” From behind his back he brought the two newspapers and placed them on Dodger’s bed.

“Hold up the pictures for me.”

The man did as he was asked. Through his hazy sight, Dodger could identify the likenesses of the three biggest influences on his life. Knowing now that this was no ruse, Dodger’s heart felt as though McCord had throttled it. As the tears began to spring he covered his face and, attempting to control his voice, he asked the man to read him the articles. The man sat beside Dodger on the bed and began to read. As the events surrounding the demise of all three were described, the ramifications hit Dodger like a jemmy to his head. He had never realised until this moment that he loved these tatterdemalion individuals – even Bill who at times he had despised due to his ungentlemanly treatment of Nancy. Dodger

listened as the man calmly recited the texts; one and then the other. Upon finishing, the man looked upon the heaving, broken boy and reached out his hand to Dodger’s shoulder.

“Do you see now, Dawkins, the nature of your cohorts?”

“Please leave me to take in this news, Sir. I thank you for bringing it to my attention.”

The man stood. He left the newspapers beside Dodger and walked sombrely towards the door where he whispered to the guard before leaving. Once Dodger knew he had gone, he let out a cry which echoed around the infirmary. After half an hour of Dodger’s heartbroken sobbing, the guard had heard enough and offered him laudanum. He initially refused it, wishing this pain to consume him but the offer was not optional. After a healthy dose and a short time of struggling against its effects, Dodger fell into a deep, black sleep.

The Artful Dodgers – Chapter 4

June, 1837.

Dodger approached the imposing Iron Gate with caution, expecting to be pulled back inside Newgate at any moment. The gate swung open and he stepped out onto the cobbled street. The noises and smells, although familiar, seemed from a part of his life that was a world away. Where once he would have seen a plant in the well-dressed gentlemen passing through the streets, he now saw only the danger they posed to him. One word from them and his world could collapse. His experiences over the past few weeks had shown him that poverty was the biggest testimony of guilt. Strings could be pulled by and for anyone who happened to have enough money to conceal the movement of the pulley.

Dodger took a deep breath and composed himself. Now that he was actually out, all of the plans he had conjured since learning of the deaths of Fagin, Nancy and Bill seemed somehow more difficult to put in place and he started to question his ability to set them in motion. The first stop would be The Three Cripples, though without money he couldn’t even stump to a swipe. The oppressive gate loomed behind him and he knew it was time to pad the hoof. He headed in the direction of The Cripples thinking he might come upon an opportunity to line his pocket on the way.

Turning into The Green, Dodger heard his name being called. He looked up from his feet to see Bet.

“Hell’s teeth, Bet! Ya look fit to drop!”

Bet did indeed look tired. The shabby dress she wore was stretched so tightly across her swollen belly that Dodger was convinced that the seams were about to give way. She was evidently nearing the end of her pregnancy.

“Y’always knew ‘ow to make me feel like a basket of oranges, Dodge. When did ya’ get out?”

“About ‘alf an hour since. I was going to see about cadging a drink at The Cripples before collecting the lads up. You seen any of ‘em?”

“Seen Charlie and Yuller. ‘Eard Baxter and a few of the others were getting by on a bit of fancy work. Ephraim ain’t doing so good. Had ‘im round ours most of last week cos ‘e took a lathering from some file.”

“Oo? Is someone running the lads, Bet?”

“Not that I know. Ephraim took the news bad about Sykes an’ that. Started ‘ecklin’ some of the lads so Charlie and Yuller put ‘im straight. He got into a few scrapes after that an’ ended up in with some wrong ‘uns. Had ‘im doin’ all sorts for ‘em. Runnin’ about mainly but it got ‘is belly filled. Let ‘is mouth run away with one of ‘em and got an ‘idin’. Seems to ‘ave brought ‘im back down ‘ere with the rest of us.”

“Where’s Baxter and the others sportin’?”

“They won’t be out yet. Drops dark before any business comes their way. They do a bit on the barrows. Them who like that go down once daylight’s gone an’ they can’t be seen.”

“Where are they sleeping?”

“I don’t know, Dodge. I was keeping an eye out for the little ones while I was working the street but there’s not the call out there for a dollymop who’s bakin’ dough so I ain’t been out as much.”

“I need to get ‘em, Bet. What with every’fing that’s gone off, I have to make ‘em right.”

Bet laughed. “You can’t take a rabble and make a regiment! What do you ‘ave planned for ‘em? The boot-black brigade?”

“If need be to keep ‘em fed and safe!” Dodger snapped back.

Incensed, Dodger eyed Bet who straightened her face. “Why you, Dodge? You can get out of all this right now. What good is it for you to be takin’ ‘em on? They don’t know you’re out. Get running!” She ran her hand over her stomach. “This onn ain’t livin’ like this. Got a plan for the poor bastard. Seen a ‘fing in the paper. There’s a woman just outside Clerkenwell ‘oo’ll take it when it comes. She’ll look after it as well. Proper, like. Gotta pay towards its upkeep but that’s no cost to know I’ve done right by it. I’ve saved enough so she’ll take it and then I send money every year. I want out of this trade, Dodge. Surely you do. They ain’t your kinchins.”

Dodger understood what Bet was saying to him and why. He also knew that few others would have the nerve to say it to his face. Resigned to his lot, he lowered his voice.

“I ain’t leavin’ ‘em, Bet.”

Bet shrugged. “The Cripples, then? A swift drain and we’ll ‘ead out to look for ‘em.”

Bet’s suggestion pulled him from his thoughts.

“You’re not comin’!”

“Well you’ll ‘ave an ‘arder job findin’ ‘em wiv’out me so you’ve two choices.”

Accepting the company, Dodger walked beside Bet to The Cripples. Glancing again at Bet’s heavy looking belly, he offered her his arm for support.

“You really gunna give yer baby to someone else, Bet?”

“What choice do I ‘ave? It’s best all round. I don’t want it and whilst ever it’s wiv’ me, the chance of me quittin’ this life ain’t there. Esther can’t see to it even though she swears she can. It’s made of sin, Dodge. I won’t keep it in sin. Nancy said to try pennyroyal when I knew I was knapped but it didn’t shift. She said I didn’t take enough but I was awful rum with it. Anyway, I can’t change it now.”

“Ow are you gettin’ by if you ain’t workin’?”

“Never said I ain’t workin’! You just gotta find the right sort who ‘as preferences for the dough. They pay more as well.”

“What, there’s men that come to you ‘cos they likes to ‘ave it with the baby in there?” Dodger sniggered.

“Oh yes! You’d be surprised what some of ‘em like. I might not be straight back to it after it comes. Nancy, God rest her soul, told me I’ll bleed after I’ve ‘ad it. Maybe for a few weeks. I can’t work then. ‘Ad to stash to make sure we get through. Esther’s doin’ bits an’ pieces but it wouldn’t feed us and she ain’t takin’ on no files an’ endin’ up like this.” Bet nodded to her stomach. “I can stretch to a drain though.”

As they entered The Cripples, a mighty cheer broke out as the regular punters clocked Dodger. Walking through the open bar area, Dodger tried to look confident as the revellers patted him on the back and shook him by the hand. There were cries of “Good to see ya,

Dodger!” and “Lookin’ well, lad!” from the shabby upstairs tables which were set against rotting wooden balustrades to maximise the limited space which ran around the outskirts of the larger lower level. He had missed this place, its bustling atmosphere and its regulars. The distinctive sweet, malty smell made him feel as though he was home and his mind was cast back to a thousand memories. He remembered Nancy dancing on the tables after too many drains and Bill dragging her down as she laughed at his irritation and embarrassment. He thought of Fagin who always made his way to the darkest corners of the upper level so as not to be easily seen, speaking in hushed tones and conducting his business with as much secrecy as could be afforded in an environment such as this. Bill’s dog, Bullseye, would always be lying close to the wall in an attempt to avoid the clumsy foot-fall of the drunken revellers, waiting for Bill to give him the whistle which meant home time.

The place was in high spirits as was usually the case and Dodger felt his own mood begin to lift.

It wasn’t until he laid his eyes on Toby Crackit that there was an acknowledgement of the tragedy. From across the room, Crackit gave a lugubrious nod to Dodger and held his gaze which was only broken when a pot was placed in Dodger’s hand by a jubilant Tom Chitling.

“Let me be the first to welcome you back proper-like. A toast to our Dodger!”

“Very kind, Tom.”

“There’ll be more where that came from. I’ve been where you ‘ave and us men who know ‘ow to bite our tongues and take it on the chin deserve a bit of respect!”

Tom was a tall, skinny lad in his late teens who Dodger remembered being in the gang until he had been caught doing Fagin’s bidding and sent to the Stone Jug for a stint.

Dodger had little time for him as he was by far his own biggest admirer despite being sloppy when grafting and looking rather unkempt. He was less favoured than he liked to believe due to the bluster which fell from his mouth and associations which he claimed to hold. Dodger was well aware that he was making a fuss of him so that people would see them together and Tom could ride on his coat tails and claim some unearned credit for his deeds. Dodger knew that nothing good would come for him from being seen with Chitling and he didn’t want to encourage the sneak.

“I must attend to some business, Tom, so I thank you for your well-wishes and bid you farewell.”

Tom’s shoulders dropped; disappointed to be abandoned whilst all eyes witnessed him with the younger hero. In a last ditch attempt to make the most of the public appearance, he put his arm around Dodger’s shoulder. With a raised, jovial tone, he bellowed, “Always got some business on the go, my good friend Dodger! You know to call on me if there is any’fin’ you need whilst you get back on yer feet.”

He raised his glass for all to see. “To Dodger!”

“To Dodger!” The expected response from the punters who proceeded to hold up their pots in the direction of the pair appeased Tom who patted Dodger on the back, bowed his head towards Bet and returned to his seat.

Dodger turned to Bet and rolled his eyes which made her chuckle.

“I see Crackit is waiting for an opportunity to get over ‘ere. I’ll save ‘im the bother. You comin’?”

“Nah, Dodge. I’m the wrong shape for crowds. I’ll wait ‘ere. Come and find me when you want to ‘ead out to find the lads.”

Dodger took the beer which Tom had provided and headed to where Toby Crackit sat. As he approached, Crackit rose to greet him with a sullen demeanour. This was an almost permanent state for Crackit who always appeared to carry the weight of Clerkenwell for all of its inhabitants.

“Nasty business, what happened with Nancy, Dodger. And then to lose Sykes and Fagin over it all. I know they was like fam’ly to ya. When did ya gerrout?”

“Got out today, Toby. Found out about it all when I was in though.”

Dodger hung his head and sighed, realising that the weasly-faced man had done him a great favour by telling him whilst he was in the infirmary. It had given him time to let it sink in. He knew that all the old mugs would be at him for information and had today been the first he’d heard of it, he wouldn’t have had time to plan.

“Where you sleepin’ tonight, Dodge? S’pose she’ll put you up?” Crackit nodded towards Bet.

“Not thought past findin’ the lads. That’s where I’m ‘eadin’ next.”

“Ah, the lads. I was gunna ‘ave a chat with you about ‘em. They’ll need an eye keepin’ out for ‘em. Now Fagin ain’t ‘ere for ‘em, they’ll need someone to step up.”

Although Dodger had expected Crackit or some other file to try and run the boys whilst he was in the Stone Jug, he hadn’t expected him to wait until he was released. There was something rum about this and until he knew what it was, he didn’t want to risk alienating Crackit unless he absolutely had to.

“I s’pect so, Toby. What are your thoughts?”

“You know me, Dodge. I ain’t got no big ideas.” A glint in Crackit’s eyes gave him away. “I just wondered if you were after someone to step into Fagin’s shoes? I know the lads are gunna need someone to make sure there’s a decent meal for ‘em after they’ve been out graftin’, eh?”

“Never knew you was much of a man to stay indoors doin’ women’s work, Toby.”

“Well,” Crackit moved closer to Dodger and lowered his voice, “Fagin saw some benefits, didn’t he? Them lads earned their keep for ‘im.”

“They did indeed, Toby, they did indeed.”

Dodger knew what Crackit was after. He saw money in the lads and an easy profit for himself. He suspected that Crackit had most likely approached one or two of the lads to see how the land lay and been given short shrift. He must have waited for Dodger’s release so that he would get the lads on-side. He had to think quickly as Crackit could be useful to him in the future and refusing him outright could jeopardise his plan.

“These few weeks will ‘ave knocked ‘em for six, Toby. The lads’ll need to feel secure again before putting their trust in someone from outside the gang.”

“I ain’t from outside the gang, Dodger! Them lads know me!”

“I know that and you know that but they’ve been fendin’ for ‘emselves since Fagin got collared and that can chip away at a lad’s trust, Toby. I need some time with ‘em.”

“Right, Dodge, right. Of course. I’d make sure no harm came to ‘em though. You know that, don’t ya?”

Dodger thought about the statement. Crackit knew that some of the methods of bringing in the blunt could not ensure the safety of anyone, let alone young boys. It was

reputation and cunning on the part of Fagin and his association with Bill which prevented many of the otherwise inevitable hazards occurring. Dodger started to wonder if Crackit realised the extent to the types of business Fagin was into.

“Let me talk to ‘em, Toby. I won’t go against their wishes if they are making ends meet but I will explain the benefits of working under two such gentlemen as ourselves.”

The look on Toby’s face alerted Dodger to the fact that he had not bargained on him stepping up and taking charge of the gang. The revelation could alienate Crackit and that wasn’t something he wanted to rush into. Knowing that he had to tread carefully, he quickly added,

“Like ya said, Toby, Fagin and Bill were like fam’ly. What they didn’t tell me, I saw. I know who they fenced to and the value of the stuff. I know you was close to Fagin but nobody knew every’fing when it came to ‘im.”

Crackit attempted to make his tone jovial.

“I assumed, Dodge, that you’d want to get back to ‘ow things were. No responsibilities, going about your business as you always ‘ave before.”

“If the gang is gunna get back into the old ways, Toby, they’ll need leading to it by someone they ‘ave absolute faith in, and that, my friend, would fall to me.”

Crackit knew that Dodger was right. He had underestimated the lad and hoped that he would not have to share profits in this venture, but he could have no share whatsoever without Dodger’s knowledge and ability to get the rest of the gang into the idea.

“OK, Dodge. Keep me informed when you’ve spoke’ to ‘em. You know where to find me.”

“It’s gunna take some time to find ‘em, Toby. Then I’ll ‘ave to start winnin’ ‘em over. I won’t ‘ave an answer for you before the week’s out.”

“OK, Dodge. Just find me when you know ‘ow they’re gonna go. You know ‘ow good this could be for us though so help ‘em choose the right path.”

“I’m sure I will, Toby. Ain’t nobody can persuade like The Artful Dodger. If I can’t do it, it can’t be done!”

At this, Crackit smiled. “I ‘ave no doubt, Dodge. No doubt at all.”

Dodger decided that now was the time to leave, so bidding farewell to Crackit, he headed to where Bet now sat, surrounded by three gaudily dressed girls who he knew to be Judys.

“Are you right, Bet?”

Bet began to rise from the table of cooing women who were rubbing her stomach and assisting her to stand.

Dodger bowed his head to them. “Ladies.”

“Nice to see ya, Dodge. Make sure you get this one ‘ome safe, yeah?”

Bet laughed. “The worst that could ‘appen to me already ‘as, Patience dear!”

The other women cackled.

Holding out his arm to Bet, Dodger bid the Judys farewell “Right then, girls. We’ll see you around, no doubt.”

As almost everyone and his wife wished to bestow well-wishes upon Dodger as he left, the couple’s exit took longer than either of them hoped.

“Is it dark enough for ‘em to be out yet, Bet?”

“I’d say so, Dodge. Come on.”

The Artful Dodgers - Chapter 5

June, 1837.

After leaving The Cripples, Bet led Dodger to the barrows where she suspected that they would find at least a couple of the lads. The sun had gone down and the streets were swapping shifts. During daylight hours, respectable ladies strolled with perambulators while gentlemen went about their business, but once the evening brought about the cloak of darkness, the less respectable would begin their own work. The place smelled differently at night. During the day, the stench was masked to a point by the goods on sale and the crowds passing through, but now the rubbish from the day’s trading was left on the ground ready to be trampled into the already festering layers beneath and leaving an odour which Bet associated with business that only took place after dark.

Walking down the back alleys, Bet watched as Dodger’s eyes darted over the woebegone sights and wondered if his time away had changed his perception of what went on here. Dollymops touted for business from the better dressed men who were brave enough to be out after dark while thieves scuttled and darted about, identifying new targets and old. Entire families attempting to avoid the workhouse, bedraggled and famished, huddled together behind upturned costermonger carts which provided shelter from the wind.

Bet had worked this patch herself and knew many of the girls they passed. She stopped occasionally to ask if the lads had been seen yet that night but was met with shaking heads. Although disheartened, they continued on to the bottom of the empty market place where the majority of the inhabitants had four legs, whiskers and carried a host of diseases.

Dodger was becoming agitated and wanted to leave the abandoned stalls but Bet stopped him and gestured for him to be silent. She tiptoed towards a pile of broken shallows and as she got closer, a pale face popped up from behind one of them.

“Hell’s teeth! Dodger!”

It was Yuller, followed immediately by Ebbe and Edward. The lads leapt from behind the cart, scrambling to be the first to greet Dodger in the usual fashion; a punch on the arm and an attempt at a head-lock.

Bet looked on as the boys expressed their delight at being reunited. After the initial horse play, Dodger asked about the other lads. “Where’s the uvvers’, Yuller?”

Edward snapped his head towards the alleyway ahead of the carts. Ebbe nudged him. “We don’t give ‘im away, Ed!”

“But it’s Dodger. We can tell Dodger, can’t we Yuller?”

Yuller nodded and patted Edward’s head. “Only Dodger, Ed.”

Bet, curious as to what Edward meant, sidled towards the entrance of the alleyway as the conversation took place. She crept a short way down into the pitch black corridor pulling her hair behind her ears as she listened intently. She startled herself as she kicked a rock which hit the wall and clattered on the cobbles.

“Who’s there?” A man’s voice from the darkness further into the alley called.

Unexpectedly, the familiar voice of Charlie came from behind her.

“Sorry, mister. We was just down ‘ere for a knee trembler! Didn’t realise someone was already ‘ere. We’ll be on our way.”

“Right, yes, right. Be gone.”

Bet felt her arm grabbed as she was led from the alleyway, back towards Dodger and the others. Charlie whispered as they went.

“Keep movin’ Bet. Baxter’s down there with that man.”

Bet swung her head back towards the darkness but Charlie gripped her arm more tightly and pulled her sharply.

Bet clenched her teeth and hissed back to Charlie, “I’ll bleedin’ lay you down if you don’t tell me what’s goin’ on ‘ere, Charlie Bates!”

“Walk!” Charlie snapped in as hushed a tone as was possible whilst still getting the urgency across to Bet.

Bet was angry and confused. Why would Charlie lead her from one of the boys when he was so obviously practicing acts which were dangerous for a hundred different reasons? She had, however, known Charlie Bates as long as she could remember and she knew that he would not see any of the gang come to harm if he could prevent it. She had seen him cover Dodger’s back a time or two and he had always been the one to take the risks when introducing any of the younger or less experienced lads into the business. Reluctantly, she followed his lead with him still holding her arm.

As they headed towards the stalls from the alleyway, Dodger was walking towards them staring into the dark passage, fists clenched.

Charlie stood before him, silently but vigorously shaking his head as a signal to Dodger that he should not pass them. Dodger’s jaw set but he took the signal and allowed himself to be walked backwards, still staring intently past Charlie and Bet into the alley.

Bet pulled her arm from Charlie’s grasp, angrily. “What’s this Charlie? You runnin’ the lads? Is that man ‘avin’ Baxter?”

“No. He’s just lookin’ at ‘im. That one’s OK. He just wants to look at their body while ‘e... ya know, plays with ‘imself. I always stay near ‘em when they’re sportin’. Tried to stop ‘em doin’ it but they won’t so I get as close as I can and if anyone gets rough with ‘em or refuses to pay, I hit ‘em with a brickbat and we get outta there.

Dodger was enraged. “I’m goin’ down there for ‘im, Charlie.”

“No, Dodge. He’ll not thank you for it. That cove with ‘im is kind. He doesn’t lay a finger on the lads. He’s just friggin’ while he looks at them. He don’t have ‘em take their clothes off. Don’t lather ‘em or make ‘em touch him. Some of the men that wants ‘em are vicious. Like to ‘urt ‘em. Please Dodge. Let it play out.”

Bet could see Dodger’s face which gave away how this dilemma was affecting him. Although he remained where he was, he didn’t take his eyes from the opening of the alley until he heard the man’s steps getting louder as he came closer to its entrance. All the lads, including Dodger turned their backs as the man emerged from the alley and quickly scuttled away.

The lads rushed down into the dark passageway to where Baxter sat. He smiled at the coins he had just earned before putting them in his pocket. Charlie put out his hand to Baxter who took it and levered himself from the ground.

“What was the turn up?” Baxter asked Charlie, pushing his thick, black, matted hair from his eyes.

“I was on look-out when Bet came creepin’ about an’ nearly gave you away. ‘Ad to think quick.”

Bet decided that now wasn’t the time to get into a barney about it. Her load felt heavy and the day had been long and eventful. “You all right, Baxter?” she asked, inspecting his ragged clothes for signs of being ripped, which of course they were, though not on this occasion through the rough methods that Bet was now imagining.

“Yeah! Easy blunt, that one. I wish they were all like that.”

“Where’s the others now?” Dodger asked.

Charlie looked to his feet. “Wiley and Fletch are back at the crib.”

“And Ephraim?”

“Caused some right bother, Dodge. When they came for Fagin, we ran to the ken, like we arranged. We stayed there a few days but there wasn’t no food and we didn’t know if the traps were onto us so we ‘ad to lie low for a bit. Ephraim was impatient and wanted out. Tried to get the little ‘uns out to prig. When me and Yuller stopped ‘em goin’, he started on about ‘ow they were only extra bellies anyway and that we should turn ‘em over to the parish so they wouldn’t be relyin’ on us no more. Got on about how Fagin weren’t comin’ back, nor you, and that someone needed to take charge of every’fing. He got lairy with everyone and the little ‘uns were scared of ‘im so we had to throw ‘im out, only he was carryin’ on as he went, sayin’ he was gonna blow on us so we ‘ad to get outta there, just in case. Lucky for us, we found a place near the river. Ain’t no stairs in it but we don’t need ‘em. We put some planks between upstairs and downstairs and it’s private-like so we’ve been stayin’ there. We’ll take ya.”

They all headed from the alley, through the market, towards the dilapidated buildings by the Thames. They passed rows of structures, all looking as though a good wind would bring about their downfall. Charlie led past the first row and down a dirt track which was

slippery from the moisture being sucked from the river. Bet struggled as the other lads skipped past. Dodger took her arm.

“You should be gettin’ back to Esther, Bet. This ain’t safe for you in your condition.”

Determined to carry on, she leaned into Dodger, gripping the arm that steadied her. She attempted to sound more confident than she felt.

“I’m fine, Dodge. Just carryin’ a bit of extra cargo, that’s all. Besides, if I do fall, maybe my misery can be brought to an end sooner than I thought!”

Dodger looked perplexed at the callousness in Bet’s humour. “As soon as I’ve had my eyes on the lads, I’ll walk you back. Ephraim might be at yours and I need a word with him, the bleedin’ hobbadehoy!”

She wondered how much further they would go as the wet ground underfoot became increasingly hazardous. She allowed Dodger to guide her down the track to where the boys now stood waiting at the front of a ramshackle two storey building. The rotting wooden double doors were held together by a thick, rusted iron chain. Before the doors was a gap of about two feet; the separation caused by the ever-present stagnant water corroding the earth.

One by one, the lads leapt over the gap and past the doors, disappearing around the side of the building. Bet noticed an awkward movement in Dodger’s leg as he jumped across and lost his footing. He landed heavily on his knee causing him to wince.

“Dodger, you OK? What’s wrong with ya leg?”

“Nothin’ that won’t right itself.”

Dodger stood and held his hand out to Bet who stepped widely across the gap but needed help and had to be pulled over the foul-smelling space. Dodger didn’t comment as he

assisted her, which was a welcome relief for Bet who was desperate not to show how difficult she was finding this ramble.

Once across, Bet followed Dodger around the side of the building where Charlie was knocking a complicated rhythm onto a side panel until it was moved to one side and the boys were allowed access.

Bet went ahead of Dodger into a dank, malodorous room which was serving as a fastness for the lads. Looking around at the decaying floorboards and crumbling walls, Bet was saddened at how the lads were living. Her own rooms were no palace, but in comparison to this place which was utter wretchedness, they were nothing short of luxury. These conditions were nothing unusual for the inhabitants of this city, but the protection which had previously been in place had afforded the lads some basic comforts which were not apparent here. She looked at Dodger as he entered the room and identified with his obvious despondency.

She watched his eyes dart around the room, opening ever wider at the appalling sight before him. His inspection was cut short by Wiley running at him, flinging his arms about Dodger’s legs and calling his name as though he was throwing himself at the mercy of the beak. Wiley’s wild, ginger hair was filthy and Dodger inspected the hand he had just used to tousle it.

“Hey, younker!”

“Are you back, Dodger? You gunna look after us now?”

The hope in Wiley’s voice touched Bet deeply. She knew now why Dodger couldn’t leave them to fend for themselves. Although all children quickly grew streetwise in this city, the purity which still shone from the younger boys here was doubly heart-breaking,

considering that their innocence had been taken from most of them at ages at which they would have still been considered babies.

Bet’s legs were throbbing and she looked about her for a place to sit among the chaos. At the back of the room, she saw rough hessian sacks stuffed with straw which the boys were using as mattresses. She walked carefully towards them, wary of the rotting floorboards beneath her feet.

Fletcher, who with a couple of the others had been replacing the panel and several of the heavy crates which secured it from the inside, noticed Bet heading for the mattresses and skilfully hopped across the corroded floor to point out his own. Excitedly, he beckoned her to it.

“I don’t let the rats sit on mine, but you can!”

The words were too much for Bet who fought back tears as she approached it. The humble little boy was offering his most prized possession.

“Don’t ya wanna?”

Dodger answered for her. “She’s tired and she needs to get that belly back to ‘er sister, Fletch.”

The boy appeared genuinely shocked. “Is she borrowing it from ‘er, Dodger?”

Dodger and the older boys sniggered while the young ones looked to them for an answer to the question.

“Now I know where you are, I’m gunna walk ‘er ‘ome and come back ‘ere. Then we’re gunna make a plan. Right lads?”

There were cheers and hollers at the welcome suggestion. Edward jumped excitedly on the spot. Yuller reached across and touched his shoulder to stop him as the boards below the lad began to splinter. Edward’s face turned from joy to displeasure and he scowled at Yuller who took no notice and continued to cheer.

This idea came as a great relief to Bet, though she was torn about leaving the boys in this hovel.

“You want me to come with ya, Dodge?” Charlie asked. “I can lead you back ‘ere even on the darkest of nights.”

Bet saw the wisdom in Charlie’s words and hoped that Dodger would agree, ensuring his safe return here.

“A bit of company as you walk back, Dodge. Sounds sensible to me.”

“I know these streets like the back of my ‘and - at any time of the night or day, Bet, don’t you worry about that!”

“That you may, old friend, but I know the right stepping stones that’ll keep you upright!” Charlie piped up.

With that, Bet, Dodger and Charlie headed out into the night.

The Artful Dodgers Chapter 6.

June, 1837.

The walk home was hard on Bet. Her legs were still throbbing and she began to feel waves of pain in her lower back. She lagged behind Charlie and Dodger, refusing to let either of them take her arm. She didn’t want them fussing over her and encouraged them to walk a pace or two ahead so that they wouldn’t notice her pushing her fist into her spine. The conversation between Charlie and Dodger was jovial for a time as they teased one another like brothers. These two were as close as kin having grown together under the roof and guidance of Fagin. As they went through the market for the second time that evening, the tone of the conversation became more serious and Bet quickly caught up to them, curious as to whether either would already have any ideas about improving their lot.

“When did they start sportin’ again, Charlie?” Dodger asked.

“Come off it, Dodge. They’ve always done it. Never stopped. Granted, they never got involved in the money side of it but they was sold, Dodge. You know that. Same as we all were.” Charlie’s voice trailed off. “Well, not you, but the rest of us.”

Dodger stopped dead. He grabbed Charlie by the shoulder and span him around so that he faced him. “You think I wasn’t sold?”

“Not like we was, Dodge. You weren’t taken to them clubs and made to do stuff wiv’ them men.”

“Is that so, Charlie?” Dodger nodded as though agreeing with Charlie’s statement though Bet saw through it and was surprised at the new information.

“When, Dodge?” She asked.

“When I was young. Like the little ‘uns. Fagin ‘ad this fence. Monks he was called.”

Bet knew of Monks. Nancy had mentioned him - always with disdain. Bill had hated him and wouldn’t have him spoken of. Nancy had told her once that Bill had almost beaten him to death at her request. She wouldn’t say why, but Bet began to think it was connected to what Dodger and Charlie were now discussing.

“I know Monks.” Charlie started walking again, though at a slower pace. “He was the one that took us to the clubs or sometimes houses where it was all beer and skittles for the men who were there waiting for us.”

Bet knew the kinds of gatherings of which Charlie spoke. This was not unlike her own initiation into fancy work.

“It was easier if a few of us went at once, that way we could share the work. If we went alone it was worse cos it was never just one man. We was always made to feel like Fagin’s favourites for a while after if that ‘appened. He’d wait on us, make sure we got plenty of grub while the others was out fogle-‘unting. We always ‘ad a few days at the ken with lots of drain and laudanum if the pain was bad.”

Bet listened to Charlie’s words and thought of the times in the early days when Nancy had given her laudanum before she went in with punters and when blunt was tight, she substituted it with gin. She knew now the mercy she was shown in receiving it. She looked at Dodger whose head hung as he walked.

“How come Fagin didn’t send you with Monks when he sent the others, Dodge?” she asked.

Dodger was slow to answer. “Monks took me a couple of times to the club. I remember Fagin really bangin’ it ‘ome that this was special business and that we didn’t talk about it to anyone – ‘specially Nancy. I was passed around between a few of the men. Some of ‘em watched, drinking and smoking as though they were watchin’ a slang cove at the music ‘all. Anyway, this one night, I went off wiv’ Monks to the club and one of the men there wanted me in a different room - away from the rest. I went with him into this pokey room that just had a bed in it. He barked at me to take off my clothes, which I did. He sat on the bed as I undressed. Then he made me lie, face down on it while he tied my wrists and ankles to the bed frame. He used things. I couldn’t see what they were but each thing was bigger. I was in pain and knew I was bleedin’. It was the last thing he put in that put an end to my days as a catamite. I don’t know to this day what it was but I know it was made of glass. I was strugglin’ cos of the pain and it broke, still inside me.”

Bet gasped and stopped in her tracks. She’d had no idea that Dodger had been pimped like the others and had always thought that they’d have had more protection. Forgetting her own discomfort for a moment, she looked at Dodger with a sympathy that she had never felt for him before, but he continued to walk.

“I started bleedin’ bad and the file started screamin’. Monks burst in and told ‘im to get out. Wiv’out untyin’ me, he ran back to where the other punters were, saying he needed a quack. One of the punters came in sayin’ he was a doctor. He took a look and told Monks to get ‘im some clean water, rags and laudanum. He said that someone should be sent to ‘is home to collect ‘is medical bag. The things that were to ‘and at the club were fetched and while I was still tied, he gave me the laudanum. He started picking out the broken glass. I passed out and came ‘round back in the ken.”

Bet made a guess at what happened next. “Nancy found out, didn’t she?”

“I didn’t get out of bed for weeks. Fagin tried to ‘ide me when she came round, saying I was out wiv’ the others but she seemed to know he was lyin’ and found me. She attacked ‘im after she saw me, throwin’ any’fing she could get ‘er ‘ands on and screechin’ that I was ‘alf dead. She kept askin’ how he could put “our boy” into this work. I loved it when she called me that. Any’ow, my injuries ‘ealed eventually but there was damage which meant I couldn’t do it no more.”

Shamed at his earlier assumption, Charlie said, “We all thought it was cos you was so good at the other business, that you made ‘im enough money on the sneak so he kept you out of the fancy work for that.”

The three turned the corner to the street where Bet lived with Esther. On reaching the house, Bet invited them in for a drain which they gladly accepted.

The door was unlocked and the three of them walked into the sparsely furnished room. Esther was home and jumped up from the table, obviously relieved to see Bet home.

“Where’ve ya been ‘til this hour, Bet? You never said you was out late tonight. I thought the baby ‘ad come!”

“I’m fine, Est. Been out wiv’ Dodger. He’s getting’ the lads back together. It’ll be like the old times, before he went away.”

“Speakin’ of which, is Ephraim here?” Dodger, seeing that Ephraim was not in the room where they stood, looked through the doorway to where the girls slept.

“He’s out lookin’ for Bet. I was frettin’ awful-like an’ he said he’d go out an’ see if anyone ‘ad seen ‘er.”

Bet took one of the two wooden chairs which sat neatly under a little ligneous table which was strewn with the sewing jobs that Esther had been doing to bring in a few extra coins. Her feet seemed to throb all the more for her weight no longer being carried by them.

Esther fixed them all a drain. Charlie leaned against the wall while Dodger, after offering the second chair to Esther who refused it, sat at the table with Bet. Esther opened the cupboard which was built in to the alcove and pulled out some bread and cheese, both wrapped in muslin parcels. “You’ll all be in need of a feed, no doubt.”

“Not me, Est.” Bet replied. “Give the bread and cheese to the lads. They can share it among the others when they go back.”

“I think you’d be as well keeping that for yourself and that baby of yours.” Charlie sniggered. “Give it enough strength to get out!”

“No, Charlie. Take it. No arguin’. Me an’ Est ain’t saving for a new place.”

“Nor are we.”

“She’s right,” Dodger chipped in. “We need to get the lads outta’ there, Charlie.”

“How do you suggest we do that, Dodge? You ain’t up for the lads sportin’ an’ we just don’t have the connections to pass the stuff from just wipin’ to keep us all fed.”

Remembering Dodger’s meetings earlier that day, Bet asked, “Didn’t Toby Crackit offer to help while we was at The Cripples, Dodge?”

“No Bet, he was after getting’ ‘is own belly filled on the lads spoils. I knew he’d come in handy for fencing some stuff so I bought us some time and told ‘im I’d talk to everyone once I’d found ‘em. We need to keep ‘im away from the lads – the younger ones, anyway.”

“The ken’s OK for now, Dodge.” Charlie said. “At least we’re safe there.”

“Safe ‘til it drops into the river, Charlie Bates!” Bet snapped.

“What do you suggest then, Bet. Are we all to move in ‘ere with you and Esther? Ephraim’d have to go though.”

Bet thought about the predicament. There was scarcely room enough for herself and Esther in the two rooms. Ephraim was only staying until he found another floor to rest his bones. She knew that if the others stayed at the decrepit house, it was only a matter of time before calamity struck. She was sure that one of the lads would be through the floor and into the Thames at any moment.

Dodger cut in. “Ephraim’s comin’ back, Charlie.”

Charlie’s face contorted with anger and he began to protest but Dodger quickly closed him down.

“Ephraim will be different now I’m back. We’re safer in bigger numbers and he’s made some associates since I’ve been away. We at least need to talk to ‘im. If everyone feels the same, he’s out for good, but he was scared, Charlie. He was always one to cause the bother rather than ‘ave it creep up on ‘im. That way he ‘ad some kind of control over it. He just needs to know where ‘is next meal’s comin’ from. We don’t know what he was livin’ before he came to the gang, Charlie.”

Bet had never thought of why Ephraim continually shot himself in the foot but what Dodger was saying made sense to her. Charlie remained silent.

Bet felt an urge to stand and walk around the room. The pain in her back felt no easier for sitting down. Esther noticed her pain and rushed to her side.

“No need for fussin’ Est. It’s just ‘eavy and it makes my back ache. Leave me be. I’ll walk it off.”

“OK, Bet. You know best. I’m ‘eadin’ to bed. Wake me if that pain gets bad.”

The lads wished Esther goodnight.

Bet walked around the room as the lads drank up. She stopped and poured them another. Within a few seconds she was pacing again.

“Bet, you don’t look right.” Dodger was eyeing her movements. “Is it to do wiv’ the baby?”

“I’m thinkin’, Dodge, that’s all.” The pain in her back wasn’t shifting. Placing her fist at the base of her spine as she walked, Bet tried to distract herself with a plan. She knew that the boys would keep sporting whatever Dodger did and he couldn’t be with them all the time. They needed a ken that wasn’t falling into the river but they needed protecting when they were sporting too. It was then that it came to her.

“Dodge we need a place. All of us. Charlie’s doin’ ‘is nut tryin’ to keep ‘em all safe on the streets.”

“I’m back now, Bet. I’ll be keepin’ ‘em safe.”

“Be realistic, Dodge. The only thing that keeps anyone safe is blunt.”

“How would all of us gettin’ a place keep everyone safe?”

“Don’t shut me down, Dodge. Did you ‘ave an idea about what you’d do once you found ‘em?”

“Right now, Bet, I’d be happy to hear any ideas.”

As she walked the room, Bet laid out the plan. Dodger had said himself that the more of them there was, the safer they were. Whilst ever they were sporting in the streets, they were vulnerable - and so was their ken. What if punters could come to them? They could have protection in each other and punters paid more for a few comforts. Regular money, proper rooms and no rats.

“I don’t want ‘em sportin’ no more, Bet,” Dodger said when she had finished “and where would we find a place?”

“Charlie tried to stop ‘em sportin’ but they’re starvin’, Dodge, an’ you ain’t got the means to feed ‘em. Whatever yer next move, you know you’re gunna ‘ave to use what’s available to you to bring some blunt in. Once you’ve got that, you can get ‘em out of this life.”

Finishing his drink, Dodger said, “Come on, Charlie. It don’t look as though Ephraim’s comin’ back.”

“Listen to ‘er, Dodge. She’s makin’ sense. At least put it to the others. I’d do it again if I thought it was a way outta this. You got any better ideas?”

Dodger stood to leave. He snapped at Charlie, “You comin’ or what?” He headed to the door.

Charlie stood to follow him. As he was walking through the door after Dodger, he turned and winked at Bet. She wanted to follow them and convince Dodger that there was merit in this plan but the pain was gradually getting worse. Between the whirring of her mind and the increasing discomfort in her back, she knew that this would be a long night.

The Artful Dodgers – Chapter 7

June, 1837.

Bet had paced the floor for hours, stopping occasionally to grip the back of the chair as waves of agony flew from her back and around her stomach before settling between her legs. Her waters had broken some time before and she hoped that the baby would be born soon. Nancy had told her that some women were like this for days and she was already exhausted. Another pain shot through her and this one felt different. She bent double, holding the chair with one hand and the table with the other. She let out a low grunt as she pushed from her stomach. Esther appeared from the bedroom having been woken by the sound.

She ran toward her sister and placed Bet’s arm around her shoulder.

“You should’ve woken me, Bet. Let’s get you in the bedroom.”

Bet allowed herself to be helped to the bed. Esther aided her onto it and she instinctively got onto her knees. Esther lifted Bet’s dress and gasped.

“This little ‘un’s in a proper ‘urry, Bet! No time to fetch anyone now.”

“I didn’t want anyone! You know this baby ain’t staying, Est. I don’t want anyone lookin’ at me with pity when it’s born.”

Bet fell forward as another pain rushed from her back. Through gritted teeth, she growled, using the pain to push down, forcing the baby’s head to crown. Esther threw the dress onto Bet’s back to free her hands which she intuitively put to the infant’s head.

“Right Bet, push again now and it’s head’ll be out.”

Bet howled with the effort of the push, tears rolling down her face. Her whole body rocked as the head was born.

“I can see it’s little face, Bet! It’s nearly here!” Esther squealed.

“Pull it out now, Esther!” Bet panted.

“You ain’t s’pose’ to pull it, Bet!” Esther couldn’t help but laugh. Bet tried to swing around but her position prevented it so she defiantly threw her hand around, slapping Esther’s shoulder. She couldn’t believe that Esther was seeing amusement at a time like this when she herself was so frightened and exhausted.

“I reckon if you push again, Bet, it’ll be out. You ready?”

Bet didn’t think she had another push in her but her body seemed to take over and begin to contract around the baby’s shoulders. With one final bearing down, the baby was born into Esther’s hands.

“Show me, Esther. What is it?” Bet asked, breathlessly.

“It’s a boy, Bet, and he’s perfect.” Esther looked at the tiny boy in her hands. Bet dropped against the bed and held out her arms. “Show me, Esther.”

“I can’t, Bet. There’s somethin’ ‘olding you an’ ‘im together, like a rope, with blood all over it.”

Bet was alarmed. Nancy had said nothing about a rope between herself and the baby.

“Pull it off!”

“I can’t, Bet. It’s stuck on his belly an’ goes back up yer Missis’ Fubbs!”

Bet put her hands down between her legs and touched the slimy tube, instantly pulling her hand away, repulsed at how it felt. Panic gripped her.

“God knows I’m givin’ ‘im away and this is ‘is punishment; keepin’ us tied together so that I can’t give ‘im up! Oh, Esther, he can’t be ‘ere with us. It’s not right.”

“No Bet, I’m sure it’s not a punishment!” Esther sounded unconvincing.

As the thought of being joined eternally to her baby filled her mind, another pain shot through her.

“Esther, somethin’s wrong. It’s hurtin’ again!”

She felt that she needed to push as she had when the baby was being born. As she did so, Esther laid the baby on the bed and looking between Bet’s legs, she squealed, “The rope’s comin’ out, Bet!”

The next noise Esther made was one of disgust. Bet heard a slapping sound and looked down to see a bloodied sack at the end of the rope. Esther inspected it.

“Well it’s out a’ you now, Bet, but it’s still in the baby’s belly.”

“Won’t it come off?” Bet asked, still panicked.

“I ain’t pullin’ it. It might hurt ‘im!”

Esther handed the baby to Bet who glanced down at the tiny, blood stained- body. Esther was right; he was perfect, apart from the strange stringy tube attached to his navel. She began to worry that the woman from the advert wouldn’t take him with this strange deformity. Before she could take a proper mental picture of him, the baby found his voice and began to scream. Bet thrust him toward Esther.

“Get a blanket and get ‘im in the empty drawer in the next room. I’ve lined it with rags.”

Esther gasped. “What? He needs feedin’, Bet. Ya can’t leave ‘im screachin’! And what do I do with this?” Esther held up the rope.

Bet snapped at her sister, “Wrap it up with ‘im and take ‘im next door, Est!”

She was still holding out the baby and Esther stepped forward to take him, bewildered by Bet’s coldness. Bet turned her head as Esther took him from her.

“Bet? Why aren’t ya feedin’ ‘im?”

At that, Bet lunged herself forward and screamed at Esther, “GET ‘IM OUT!”

Esther looked hurt but Bet had no mind to care. She needed to make sense of her own feelings and looking at the baby - or worse still, allowing him to suckle - she knew was not going to help her. She would take him to the woman in the newspaper advert as soon as she had rested. Still worried that the woman would refuse to take him because he looked different, Bet knew that she had made no other plan for him and so pushed the thought from her mind. It was getting light outside and she wanted him gone as quickly as possible.

“What are you going to call ‘im, Bet?”

“I’m not going to call ‘im anythin’, Est. He ain’t mine to name.”

Esther walked from the room slowly, expecting Bet to call her back at any moment, but she didn’t.

As a confused looking Esther left the room with the crying baby, Bet realised that she would need water to clean herself but she didn’t want to go into the next room where she had left it. The room where he was. The small glimpse that she had had whilst he was in her arms

had evoked an emotion that she had never felt before and it frightened her. She could hear Esther trying to soothe him but he continued to cry. The sound made her heart ache. Her impulse was to go to him but she knew that she shouldn’t. If she went to him now, she may never be able to walk away from him and she owed him a better life than this. No. She would not torment herself. He would be fed soon enough by his new mother. The one he must get used to. The one that was not her. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

As she cried, Bet sat on the bed and looked down to the red mass caused by the birth. She wished Nancy was here. She would have fetched the water. Helped her wash. Reassured her that everything had gone as it should and that she need not worry about the blood soaked sheets, the bleeding or the dreadful thing hanging from the baby’s navel. She would have taken charge of the situation and comforted her. She would have taken the baby straight to his new home, insisting that he was taken in despite the abnormality. She would have prevented this suffering.

With tears still pouring, Bet stood and walked apprehensively to the pile of rags which she had placed on top of the upturned crate that served as a table where the sisters placed trinkets and personal effects. She took off her dress, picked up one of the dry rags and began rubbing at her blood stained thighs. The effort was fruitless and she gathered a few of the rags, placing them between her legs to soak up any fresh outpouring. With the rags in place, she collected the bloodied sheets from the bed, dropping them on the floor and making no efforts to move them from the spot where they fell. She took out a clean yet shabby nightgown and put it on her naked body before sitting back on the soiled mattress. The baby’s cries were becoming weaker and she hoped that he was falling asleep. Lying down on the mattress, Bet’s body shook as she stifled her sobs.

After a while, she realised that the baby was no longer crying. She listened intently, sitting up to make sure that the quiet was real. The door handle turned and Esther, ashen faced, entered the room with the basin of water. She looked at the sheets on the floor and then at Bet. Each of the sisters could see that the other had been crying. Esther placed the bowl on the upturned crate and then gathered the sheets from the floor. She headed back towards the room where the baby slept. Without turning to face Bet, she said,

“I’ve called ‘im Silas.”

The Artful Dodgers – Chapter 8

June, 1837.

Dodger and Charlie had returned home in silence. Upon reaching the ken, they had put on a show of unity for the lads but the unspoken discord between them was evident to Yuller, and Dodger felt that he was eyeing him from the minute they got back.

Once all of the other lads were sleeping, Charlie, with Yuller at his side, tried to talk to Dodger.

“We need to sort this, Dodge.”

Dodger had no interest in hearing his arguments.

“I’ll sleep on it, Charlie. We’ll talk about it in the mornin’.”

Looking from Dodger to Charlie and back again, Yuller was desperate to be let in on whatever was going on.

“Sort what? What needs talkin’ about? Is there a plan?”

Knowing that Charlie wanted to fill Yuller in on the suggestions that Bet had made, Dodger decided not to stay at the ken and set back out into the night. Charlie had tried to talk him out of it but assuring his old friend that they were comrades still, Dodger guaranteed him that he would return the next morning having given the situation proper consideration. He needed time to get things clear in his own mind.

As the opening to the ken was replaced behind him, Dodger thought about his next move. One thing that he was sure of was that they did need a place. Still convinced that the

lads didn’t need to rely on fancy work, neither did they need to be living in the rat infested, crumbling crib that he was leaving them in tonight.

Whilst in the Stone Jug, he had thought of Barney who had been an associate and confidante to Fagin. He had planned to call on him to discuss how they could work together to keep the line that he and Fagin previously had going, though he hadn’t planned on doing it quite so soon. Knowing that he had little choice, Dodger headed toward the fastness where he had last seen Barney.

Walking the miserable streets, he had conflicting feelings about involving Barney in any aspect of the lad’s lives and considered going back to The Cripples but the last thing he would get there was a chance to think, and besides he still had nothing to stump up with. On the one hand, he knew that Barney would help where he could and seek assistance from other associates where he could not. On the other, it meant that he may have to peach on Barney and if he did, he would have to flee, leaving the lads in the same predicament that they were in now. For the second time that evening, Dodger realised that the plans he had made whilst in the Stone Jug were inadequate. The insistence from Bet and Charlie that the lads bring in the blunt by sporting was his first snag. He was an informant now and he must satisfy his liberator with information. His activities would be monitored and putting the lads at risk of being nabbed for sodomy was not part of the plan. He could cover them for the usual lay but fancy work was another story - especially if they were doing it from a fixed crib. They could be caught on the job if there was a raid and there’d be no getting them off if that happened. He had thought that he could make his position work for him by informing on those who he felt deserved the lesson or better still, his competitors. He had believed that he could outsmart the weasly-faced man by giving him enough information to keep him busy whilst profiting from eliminating his rivals. He thought of the pride Fagin would have shown at his cunning and his grief once more enveloped him. In his desperation, he contemplated going back to the

weasly-faced man and reneging on the deal but having seen how the lads were living, he knew that he could not.

Barney had always been a friend to Dodger. He had shown him kindness, throwing in an extra magpie when Dodger delivered anything he’d got on the grab. Dodger didn’t have him on the list but by asking him for help, he risked lining him up for Jack Ketch.

As he reached Spitalfields, Dodger watched as the Judys wearily abandoned their patches and began to head home. The last punters scurried by, not wanting to be seen in the emerging light of the dawn. Despite his anguish, the sight amused Dodger who noted that those punters who he now watched darting out of the sights of prying eyes, those who at all other times of the day or night wielded influence, were vulnerable only at this hour, as the day broke and light was poured into the dingy corners where they committed acts of indecency. This hour made them scuttle like insects, back to the safety of their respectable lives.

He continued on as the streets began to fill with the workers, freshly risen from their beds and heading to their occupations. He was tired and his legs felt heavy but he plodded on toward Barney’s. Turning into a narrow, cobbled street with shop fronts running in rows down the left and right, facing one another so closely that with a decent stretch he could have touched the buildings on both sides, Dodger’s heart began to beat a little faster. The dark, brick buildings loomed above him, the stone lintels above the doors and the protruding windows on the upper levels made them feel overbearing. As he neared the house, he wondered whether Barney was still residing there as most of the criminals he knew fled any crib within a few weeks to ensure that they would not be nabbed, but on reaching the window he recognised the six pointed star, so small that it would be missed by anyone not looking for it, drawn by a fingernail into the dirt at the bottom corner of the glass. Barney drew one of

these on the window of each of the cribs he had lived and was always careful to remove it whenever he moved on. Looking about him, Dodger knocked on the door before he lost his courage. There was no answer and he knew not to knock again. He realised now that the prospect of not seeing Barney was just as bad as the alternative.

Shoulders hunched, Dodger turned to head back to the lads but the moving flame of a candle caught his eye. He could see that it was Barney, looking vexed at being disturbed at this hour of the morning. From the outside, Dodger could hear the heavy bolts on the inside of the door being pulled back. It opened a small way and through the crack, Dodger saw the illuminated face of Barney.

“It’s Dodger, Barney.”

The door flung open immediately and Dodger was yanked inside. Stumbling in, he almost lost his footing on the uneven stone floor. Dodger could see that Barney hadn’t changed the habit of sparse decoration as he looked around him to see nothing but a wooden stool and a small round table which looked dwarfed in the generously sized room. The old man was delighted to see Dodger, making his task all the more difficult.

“Dodger, my dear boy! I heard that you were out. Come in, come in. Close the door. Let me find you a drain.”

Gesturing towards the wooden stool, Barney urged Dodger to sit on it. He then disappeared from the room, returning moments later with a bottle of gin and two glasses. Dodger was still standing.

“Sit, sit, Dodge. My heart is warmed to lay my old eyes on you.”

Dodger did as he was asked.

Barney dropped into a sombre tone.

“Dodger, my boy. So much has come to pass since you were before the beak. Sad times, I say. Very sad times.”

“Sad times indeed, Barney. I was kept sane in the Jug with thoughts of Fagin and Nancy, waiting for me.”

“About that, Dodge. I heard that you’d been sentenced to lagging. However did you score your release?”

Dodger had been expecting the question and hoped that he could uphold the act that he had practiced so frequently before his discharge. Without taking his eyes from Dodger’s face, Barney poured them both a gin.

“I was lathered pretty bad by an inmate. In the infirmary for weeks, I was.”

“Terrible turn of events, Dodger. Terrible.” Barney added, shaking his head.

“Yeah. It was while I was in there that I found out about Fagin and Nancy.”

“And Bill.” Barney chipped in. “Nasty business, Dodger. Nasty.”

Dodger nodded in agreement. He could see that Barney was waiting for the full tale and he wanted to stay as close to the truth as possible, knowing that the further he veered from it, the more he would need to remember. He continued.

“While I was recoverin’, I won’t lie to ya, Barney, it really hit me an’ I was in shock. Even shed a tear or two. Couldn’t understand how it’d all gone down. I still can’t.”

Pushing one of the glasses toward Dodger, Barney added, “Some things we will never know, Dodger, my boy.”

Dodger swallowed the gin in one gulp and noticed that Barney himself had not taken a drink yet. Buying himself some time, he asked, “I’d hoped you might know the full tale, Barney. You was always most likely to know the ins and outs of it. They was my fam’ly. I went away for a bit an’ then they was gone. Came out expectin’ to walk back into my old life an’ found out it wasn’t there anymore. That’s why I’m ‘ere, Barney. I’ve found the other lads. Terrible state, they’re in. Livin’ in a crib that’s fallin’ into the Thames an’ doin’ jobs that’s gonna get ‘em nabbed cos they’re starvin’. I’ve got to do somethin’.”

“What do you think I can do, Dodger? They can’t come here. Too dangerous. For them and for me.”

“I need blunt, Barney. Crackit’s already been in my ear wantin’ to run ‘em but you know as well as I do that he’s only ever known half the tale.”

“So fill him in, Dodge. Let him try.”

This answer made Dodger anxious. Barney knew that Crackit didn’t have the means or the knowledge to run the gang. Not even if they were only sneaking. He had expected Barney to offer help or at least give him some advice.

“These are my boys, Barney. I ‘aven’t come back for ‘em to let some flat skin ‘em to make a castor for ‘imself. They’ve been through it. Crackit won’t make sure they ‘ave what they need an’ I ain’t lettin’ ‘im play the swell while they suffer, only for ‘im to realise that he ain’t got the head for it an’ leave ‘em out in the cold again.”

Dodger could see that his speech had surprised Barney. If he had been suspicious of Dodger’s motives, he was questioning his own judgement now. Barney poured more gin into Dodger’s glass, drained his own and refreshed it.

“You had no need to come back for them at all, Dodger.”

“Where else was I to go? The news hit me ‘ard an’ I don’t need lookin’ out for so how were they goin’ to take it? Besides Barney, young as they are, they still know things that could get all of us in front of the beak an’ the younkens need guidance about how to handle sensitive information.”

Barney snapped up his head and fixed Dodger with a glare that told him he had gone too far.

“How did you escape being transported again, Dodger?”

“Managed to get someone to speak up for me. Say that the benefactor I made up really ‘ad given me the cigarette case.”

“Who?”

“I ‘ad a cellmate, McCord, while I was waitin’ to go. He ‘ad connections and he was gettin’ out.”

“How very kind of this... McCord. And what did he ask in return, Dodger?”

Dodger dropped his head. “I gave ‘im a huffle.” His voice trailed off.

“You must have spent some time with him to strike this unpleasant bargain.”

“I know a molly when I meet one, Barney.”

“How would a convict make the law believe such a tale?”

“It wasn’t ‘im that spoke for me. It was ‘is sister. She married well on account of ‘er good looks. Said she owed ‘im cos it was ‘er husband that got ‘im sent to Newgate in the first place.”

Seeing that Barney was not convinced by his story, he tried a different approach.

“You ain’t ‘alf remindin’ me of Fagin with these questions, Barney.” He sniggered. “He’d be like this if ‘e thought you was ‘oldin’ out on ‘im. Always knew when I ‘adn’t given ‘im all the swag.”

“He knew you well, Dodger, as I do.”

Recognising the hint in Barney’s words, Dodger stopped sniggering and looked Barney in the eye. “You think it was easy for me to come ‘ere and confess what I did when there was only the smallest chance that it would pay off? I’m The Artful Dodger and if word got out that I had lowered myself to that, there’d have been no way I could ‘ave come back to Clerkenwell. I’d ‘ave been a laughin’ stock! It’s taken me years to build my reputation. Wiv’out it, how can I get these lads out of this Godawful mess?”

Barney drank down the second gin and nodded to Dodger’s glass as a gesture to do the same. “I had to know, Dodger.”

The Artful Dodgers – Chapter 9

June, 1837.

Bet woke to the sound of the baby stirring in the next room followed by Esther fussing over him. She had no idea of the time but the full heat of the day filled the room. Her nightdress was sticky with sweat and blood. Had she not heard the baby she would have questioned whether she had experienced the birth at all. It was then that the baby let out a cry and Bet felt a strange sensation. As he cried, her breasts began to leak the milk that her body had intended for him. Feeling wretched and dirty, she rose from the bed and walked to where the water bowl sat. The water was cloudy and tinged with pink as she had washed with it earlier but it was cleaner than she herself felt.

The baby’s cries grew louder and Esther opened the door between the rooms.

“Bet can you at least try and feed ‘im. He’s tryin’ to eat me alive in ‘ere. Every time I pick ‘im up ‘e thinks I’ve got milk for ‘im.”

“As soon as I’m dressed, he’ll be gone so you won’t ‘ave to put up with it much longer, will ya?”

“Oh, Bet, are ya really gonna take ‘im?”

Bet didn’t answer. She continued to wash. Esther began to cry.

“He needs ya, Bet. Ya can’t send ‘im away. What about that thing ‘e’s got on ‘is belly?”

“I told ya not to get attached to ‘im!” Bet snapped.

“But I am, Bet. Why won’t ya look at ‘im?”

“He’s goin’, Est. Say yer goodbyes.”

Esther ran into the next room where the baby was, sobbing. Bet finished washing. She replaced the rags and began dressing, picking out her best dress so that the woman who took the baby wouldn’t make any assumptions about her that might affect her judgement or her treatment of him. Once dressed, she used the light to see her reflection in the dusty window of the room and pulled out the bonnet which she had been saving for this day. She took a deep breath and walked into the room where Esther was sitting on the wooden chair, clutching the baby to her breast, rocking him as she whispered to him and kissed his face. He was quiet once more due to his own exhaustion and hunger. Tears streamed down Esther’s cheeks as her eyes darted between Bet and her son. Bet went to the built in cupboard, opened it and took out a number of unused woollen blankets which she had been collecting for him for when he left. Holding the blankets, she also took a small hessian sack from the cupboard and placed it in the pocket of her dress. It jingled with the sound of the coins within it. She turned to see Esther, still distressed, rocking the baby. As Bet took a step towards her, Esther’s despair took over her and she began to scream.

“No, Bet! No, no no! You shan’t take ‘im! He’s ours, Bet!”

Bet continued to walk toward her and she sprang from the chair, still holding the baby, shaking her head and backing towards the wall.

“Please, Bet! I won’t let you. Don’t you try and take ‘im! If you don’t want ‘im, I’ll look after ‘im. Look at ‘im, Bet. I can do it! I’ve kept ‘im quiet all this time. PLEASE, Bet, please.”

Esther’s voice broke into sobs which prompted Bet’s eyes to fill. Watching her sister plead for her son made her heart feel as though it was splintering in her chest.

“Think of ‘im, Esther. What can we offer ‘im?”

“Love! Only we can love ‘im like ‘e needs. He’s different. What if this woman don’t take to ‘im? I love ‘im, Bet. I love ‘im!”

Fighting back the tears, Bet took another step towards Esther holding out her arms. Esther held the baby tighter as she backed into the wall. On hitting it, she slid down to the floor, distraught. It almost overwhelmed Bet to watch this display and again, she yearned for Nancy. Knowing that she must not show her true feelings to Esther for fear that she would persuade her to keep and protect him in a way that she feared nobody else could, she took the baby. Esther made a weak effort to keep a grip of him. As he was removed from her grasp, Esther howled. Bet proceeded to swaddle the baby in the blankets, careful to wrap the rope and blood-filled sack close to his skin so that it would not pull and hurt him. Esther remained on the floor, beside herself. Bet stepped over her to get to the door. Stepping through it, her heart almost broke as Esther screamed the name which she had given to her son.

The Artful Dodgers – Chapter 10

June, 1837.

Bet walked the bustling streets of Clerkenwell, holding the baby who instinctively turned his head to her breast and attempted to suckle through her clothes. The action pulled at her already fraught emotional state. She had the urge to allow him to feed but was worried that it would affect the bond between him and his new mother. She quickened her pace, desperate to end this torture. As she walked, she tried to block out any thoughts of keeping her son. She looked down at his face and whispered his name, “Silas”.

He looked peaceful as he settled to sleep, comfortable in her arms. She fixed her gaze on the road ahead and thought about his new life. She imagined his new mother seeing the rope which protruded from his navel and her falling all the more in love with him, understanding that he needed protecting from the cruelty that he would encounter because of it.

Although frightened of the feelings for him that she was desperate to suppress, she knew that these moments, as she walked with him toward a life without her would be her only chance to take in his image. She decided that no matter how painful it would be, she must try and remember every detail of his face. She stopped and pushed the blanket back so that she could see the tufts of straight hair which were much darker than her own. She moved her eyes to his forehead and rubbed her finger across the deep crease which twitched at her touch. She fixed on his closed eyes. The almond shapes flickered as he slept. His tiny bulbous nose stretched across onto his plump cheeks. The tiny, full lips which reminded her of Esther’s moved in an imaginary sucking action even as he slept. She pulled the blanket back

over his hair and stroked his dimpled chin, looking for clues as to which of her punters might be his father. Although his eyes were closed, she had seen them back at the house after the birth. They were almost black. Many of the regulars had stopped using her when her pregnancy became evident and she realised that she had taken little notice of their faces during any of the pulley hawley in which they had engaged. Unable to recall the features of most of the men who she had pleased and therefore incapable of even guessing the child’s parentage, she felt ashamed of her profession. This drove her on to where she would hand over her child.

Eventually, she reached the house that she had walked past on several occasions in the last few months as her own curiosity had forced her to see where her child would be raised. It was a small one-story cottage which had a small fenced garden to the front. The wooden gate was tied to its post with a tatty, weather-worn scarf that she assumed kept naughty children from escaping. The rundown building needed attention but the garden allowed for children to play without fear of carriages rushing past and trampling them. Yes, this was a good home for Silas. She struggled to untie the gate with her free hand and the rattling of it alerted the occupant of the house to her presence. A plump woman, aged well into her fifties opened the door. Her greying hair was scraped back from her red face and she eyed Bet suspiciously until she saw the baby, at which point she rushed forward to assist her. As she came closer to her, Bet noted the kindness in her expression and was comforted that Silas would know love. Desperate to make a good impression, Bet pronounced her words carefully.

“Mrs Mann? I am Bet. We wrote to one another about my baby.”

Smiling, the woman replied, “Yes, dear. Do step inside. Mind the mess. The little ‘uns keep me on my toes and there’s no point to cleanin’ ‘til they’re asleep.”

Bet hadn’t considered that there may be more than one child in the house but the thought of siblings for her son was pleasant. She followed Mrs Mann into the cottage, noting that the other children she had spoken of were nowhere to be seen.

“Where are the others?” She asked, looking about her.

“Sleepin’, thank the Lord!” It gets awful noisy when they ain’t! I was just on with the washin’.” She pointed to the tin tub in the middle of the floor filled with sheets and the already wrung cloths beside it.

Seeing the confusion on Bet’s face, Mrs Mann quickly added, “They ain’t bin’ sleepin’ well at night due to the coughin’. Had the good doctor round who gave ‘em a tincture. It knocked ‘em out good an’ proper. Meant I could start gettin’ ready for this little ‘un. Wasn’t expectin’ ya for a couple of weeks but that’s not a bother. We love a new baby in this ‘ouse. Now, dear. Boy or girl?”

Taking note of Mrs Mann’s thick east-end accent allowed Bet to relax and drop back into her own. “He’s a boy. Silas. My sister named ‘im. I didn’t know if you liked to name ‘em yourself?”

“If ‘is name is Silas, girl, then Silas he shall be. Let me look at ‘im.”

Bet handed the child to the smiling woman.

“Oh, he’s beautiful!” She cooed.

The pride she felt at Mrs Mann’s words was instantly dampened by the thought of the growth on his navel.

“There’s somethin’ you need to see, Mrs Mann.”

Bet tentatively opened the blanket to reveal what she feared could lead to her taking him back with her.

“Oh my little darlin’. When did you ‘ave ‘im?”

“He was born durin’ the night.”

Mrs Mann nodded and placed the baby on a large table beside the washing. She picked up some twine from a sideboard and from a drawer, removed a sharp knife before heading back to where Silas lay. Bet instinctively stood between them. Mrs Mann began to laugh.

“Who was it helped you deliver ‘im?”

“No one. Well, my sister, but she ain’t never done it before.”

“And neither ‘ave you, I see. Step aside, Bet. I ain’t gonna ‘urt ‘im. That’s what was feedin’ ‘im while he was inside ya. He don’t need it no more.”

Bet steeped back and watched as Mrs Mann tied a measure of the twine tightly around the rope, close to the infant’s skin. She watched to see if it distressed him and was relieved to see that it did not. After checking that the twine was secure, Mrs Mann took the knife and cut through the rope. Again, the baby did not stir. Tears of relief sprang to Bet’s eyes.

“What about that bit that’s still on ‘im?” She asked.

“That’ll fall off on its own in the next week or so.”

“Me an’ Esther was so worried! We thought ‘e ‘ad somethin’ wrong wiv’ ‘im!”

Mrs Mann laughed at the naivety of the girls and Bet joined her, feeling a mixture of embarrassment and relief. She was comforted by Mrs Mann’s obvious knowledge and although torn, knew that he was in good hands here.

“Now, dear. About the money I’ll need to provide for ‘im,” Mrs Mann began.

“I have it ‘ere.” Bet pulled the hessian sack from the pocket in her dress and handed it to the older woman who emptied it onto the table beside the baby. Expertly sliding the coins one by one into her hand, Mrs Mann was satisfied and smiled at Bet.

“That’ll keep ‘is belly full and clothes on ‘is back for a while, dear. Right, we are in June and I’ll need further payments in order to keep it that way. You’ve brought blankets, I see. He’ll still be needin’ some more before winter. I ‘ave a few ‘ere that I’ve used for the ‘others that ‘ave gone before ‘im but some of the girls that ‘ave brought their babies to me like to make sure their little ‘uns don’t go without so send a few extra coins when they’ve got ‘em. I don’t insist, like some of them that advertises their services but rearin’ babies is a pricey affair and so a few extra shillin’s is always welcome. I’m the next best thing to their own mothers though I love ‘em like my own. It goes straight towards the care of the children, you understand.”

“I’ll make sure I send more soon, Mrs Mann.”

“Best that you don’t bring the money yourself though, dear. Seein’ the child can ‘ave an awful effect on both mother an’ child.”

The statement surprised Bet but she understood, as leaving him now was difficult enough.

As if reading Bet’s thoughts, Mrs Mann introduced the final difficult conversation.

“Right, dear. I think its best that you go soon before he wakes.”

Research Essay

“Just like us, the Victorians were hugely preoccupied and worried by the sex industry – should it be legitimised? Should it be repressed? How do we protect women within it? How do we stop the horrors of trafficking and child prostitution? Throughout the nineteenth century, this issue is continually in the press, in parliament and in public, as prostitution and this trade of sex by both men and women was regularly exposed and exploited by different factions within society” (Riddell, 2014, p.8).

Writing a novel about child sexual exploitation in the 1830s has led me to research the practices, the victims and the secrecy surrounding it. The focus of my novel, *The Artful Dodgers*, is of the orphans who were not in the care of the parish authority - the street urchins. The novel is set in 1837, and the children who feature in *Dodgers* are the gang portrayed by Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist* (1838). The rationale for choosing this particular group was because in doing so, I had an already recognisable set of characters that I could easily use to show a darker side to Victorian culture which although was veiled, was evident.

Dodgers borrows a timeline and several characters from Dickens’ novel and focusses on the period immediately after *Twist* and how the boys survive after the deaths of Nancy, Bill and Fagin. I decided to re-explore Dickens’ novel with a different focus; that of the children of Victorian London and their means of survival when faced with fending solely for themselves.

This essay explores child sexual exploitation in the 1830s and how lifestyle influenced the perceived victimhood of a group who did not conform to societal norms. It will also show how the research undertaken has shaped my novel, *The Artful Dodgers*.

Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* (1838) is traditionally seen as what Christopher Booker refers to a ‘Rags to Riches’ story. Booker defines the Rags to Riches story as follows:

“that which shows how some young, unrecognised hero or heroine is eventually lifted out of obscurity, poverty and misery to a state of great splendour and happiness.” (Booker, 2004, p.65).

The plot follows Oliver, an orphan born in the workhouse who, after many difficulties is eventually adopted by the affluent Mr Brownlow, the childhood guardian of Oliver’s birth mother and her sister, Rose Maylie. There is however, another theme referred to by Booker which is apparent in the novel, which is that of ‘Overcoming the Monster’, though this is only for a specific set of characters - the child gang encountered by Oliver when he arrives in London and meets The Artful Dodger. Although Booker gives a summary of Overcoming the Monster which involves the *“hero being called to face and overcome a terrible and deadly personification of evil”* (Booker 2004, p.48) it is the criminal acts carried out by and against the boys, the circumstances which have led to them to a life of crime and the lack of opportunities to escape it which are the monsters implied in *Twist* and overtly

displayed in *Dodgers*. These are the monsters created by society and nurtured by those who benefit from the hierarchy. Booker outlines this category of monster as,

“physically, morally and psychologically, the monster [...] thus represents everything in human nature which is somehow twisted and less than perfect.” (Booker, 2004, p.33).

It is only when we look past the main character, Oliver, that the plight of those trapped in the underbelly of the early Victorian era can be explored. When researching what is implied, yet not described by Dickens, we are led into the lives of characters that are not the focus of the tale despite being essential to the plot and it becomes apparent that in their narrative, not all of the monsters have been overcome. In fact, some of the most engaging characters within the gang are left with, or even fed to their monsters. Dodger, for instance, is a prime example of this. Though his character has a jovial, likeable quality which endears him to the reader, his activities are dishonest. The first introduction of Dodger instantly alerts the reader to an underhand intention. Dodger uses slang terms to assess Oliver’s naivety and is instantly rewarded. He refers to the magistrate as ‘the beak’ and Oliver cannot hide his lack of understanding. Although Dodger appears to be offering assistance to Oliver, the reader is made suspicious by the apparent kindness due to Dodger’s implied knowledge of the Stone Jug (Newgate prison). When Oliver is introduced to him, Fagin is described as a *“villainous [...] repulsive [...] Jew”* by Dickens (Dickens, 1838, p.51) and Dodger is closely associated with this villainy. This coupled with the introduction of the other boys who are *“smoking long clay pipes and drinking spirits with the air of middle aged men”* (Dickens, 1838, p.52). who then go on to obviously abuse Oliver’s naivety by taking his belongings, give a clear indication that none of the gang are trustworthy.

The decision to portray the gang as deviant was to keep the reader’s sympathies with the pure and naive orphan, Oliver. When comparing Dodger and Oliver, it is to be questioned why our sympathy is directed only towards Oliver when both boys are depicted by Dickens as being the same age (approximately 12 years old), both are orphans, neither can be described as living in a stable or loving environment and it is only the adjectives which describe Oliver that direct the reader’s sympathies. The courtesy of being irreproachable is not offered to Dodger or any of the other boys in the gang whose characters are portrayed as sly and confident with the street-wisdom associated with older criminals. The narrative in *Twist* leads the reader to feel little sympathy for the boys who are manipulated by Fagin; the descriptive language influencing the reader to see them not as children who are victims, but as threats to Oliver.

The removal of the victim status allows the reader to disassociate any feelings of sympathy and the boys are seen, not as victims, but as perpetrators of crime. The victimhood is transferred to those who fall prey to the crime and this potentially allows for the boys to be further manipulated. With the lack of compassion from society, the exploitation of them could be escalated with little or no interference. Larry Wolff suggests:

“There is certainly some sociological plausibility to the idea that runaway boys, living in a big city under the guardianship of an unscrupulous old criminal, may end up being sold, or selling themselves, for sex.” (Wolff, 1996, p.228).

Dickens falls short of stating that the boys are sold for sex. Mary Poovey’s suggestion as to the reason for this is referred to in Wolff’s article:

“In Oliver Twist such strategies tame and contain the text’s almost explosive sexual and criminal energies, and permit to emerge out of representational chaos and crisis Dickens’s most delicately contrived, tautly balanced, and ambivalently inflected ideological contribution to Victorian culture: the innocence of childhood.” (Poovey, 1988, p.12).

Dickens consistent portrayal of a gang of boys who do not conform to the Victorian ideology of childhood innocence allows the reader to disassociate them from the need to be protected. The potential reasons for Dickens choosing to leave vague the precise nature of any crimes other than theft in the novel was to prevent alienation of the reader; to state that children were used for sex was to expose a demand for the practice.

The main female protagonist in *Oliver Twist*, Nancy, is portrayed with hints towards her having worked as a prostitute and her entrance into the novel clearly shows an association with Fagin. When she enters the gang’s den, she and Bet are described as *“being remarkably free and agreeable in their manners”* (Dickens, 1837, p.57). Dickens goes on to write that *“spirits are produced”*. This presents these female characters as disreputable. There are clear distinctions made between the lowly women connected with the criminals and the respectable Victorian women whose innocence is paired with affluence, such as Rose Maylie whose virtuous character is reserved and never associated with alcohol.

Nancy states in the novel that she has worked for Fagin since she was a little girl and is aware of his manipulation of her, holding him responsible for the manner in which she has since lived, stating:

“It is my living; and the cold, wet, dirty streets are my home; and you are the wretch that drove me to them long ago, and that’ll keep me there, day and night, day and night, till I die!” (Dickens, 1838, p.105).

The inference that Nancy makes her living on the streets suggests to the reader that she is a prostitute and the reference that she was driven to them long ago as well as her statement that she was less than half Oliver’s age (Dickens, 1838, p.105) when she began working for Fagin, indicate that she had undertaken this work as a very young child. This introduces the idea that Fagin has experience of ‘Fancy Work’ (prostitution), and if he was already in the business of pimping girls, what was to say that he would not do the same with the boys? Fagin’s character is portrayed as greedy and ruthless so it is not difficult to make the leap to his pimping out the boys.

Wolff (1996) suggests that *Oliver Twist* hints strongly at Fagin selling the boys for sex and that Dickens purposefully infers this throughout the novel. Indeed, the title of the paper (The Boys Are Pickpockets, and the Girl is a Prostitute) is a reference to Dickens himself who, when answering the moral objections of readers in 1841, stated:

“some of the characters in these pages are chosen from the most criminal and degraded of London’s population; that Sykes is a thief, and Fagin a receiver of stolen goods; that the boys are pickpockets, and the girl is a prostitute.”

(Tillotson, 1977, p.553).

Dickens went on to say that he *“had indeed left intentionally imprecise the general representation of criminality”*. (Tillotson, 1977, p.553).

My motivation for writing *The Artful Dodgers* originally came through watching my daughter in an amateur production of *Oliver Twist* and thinking about the child gang portrayed by Dickens. A group of children disbanded and left without guidance or lodgings would have had to take desperate measures to survive. In order to offer my own representation of this infamous gang, I felt that one of the main protagonists of the novel had to be Dodger, the oldest and most identifiable member who was, at the end of *Oliver Twist*, awaiting deportation for the theft of a silver cigarette case. The suggestion in *Twist* being that he is approximately 12 years old gives us an idea of the ages of the younger, less experienced boys and the drastic means of survival available to them. An obvious asset was their bodies and it is from this perspective that *Dodgers* takes its inspiration.

The leap from pickpocket to prostitution was not a difficult one to make as the boys were already exposed to criminal activity and deviant behaviour. Poverty was often associated with sin and in most cases, poor, orphaned or abandoned children were the product of unmarried sex and therefore, whether in the care of the parish or fending for themselves, they were looked upon with suspicion. This conflicted with the spirit of reform and many wealthy Victorians enjoyed the kudos brought about by providing money and education to those ‘less fortunate’. Laura Peters writes in *Orphan Texts*:

“Victorian culture perceived the orphan as a scapegoat – a promise and a threat, a poison and a cure. As such, the orphan, as one who embodied the loss of the family, came to represent a dangerous threat; the family reaffirmed itself through the expulsion of this threatening difference. The vulnerable and miserable condition of the orphan, as one without rights, enabled it to be

conceived of and treated as such by the very structure responsible for its care.” (Peters, 2000, p.2).

Peters’ recapitulates my research regarding the hidden exploitation of vulnerable orphans in the 1830s. Depictions of the conditions and injustices faced by orphans are many, and are aimed at audiences of all ages. Through description and language it is made clear by the authors that the practices of those responsible for the ill treatment of the defenceless protagonists are fundamentally wrong, especially in the books aimed at children, yet despite the moral lessons which cause the reader/viewer to sympathise with those suffering, the messages do not fully alert them to the dangers which are faced by characters seen as troublesome through the predicaments they find themselves in.

In order to research attitudes to child sexual exploitation in Victorian England, I looked to the First-Person accounts of the time collected by Henry Mayhew in *London Labour and the London Poor* (Mayhew, 1851), as well as those collected by Bracebridge Hemyng, John Binny and Andrew Halliday which appeared in *The London Underworld in the Victorian Period* (2005). It was when I began to reread these accounts that I noticed a distinct absence of examples of male child prostitution. Child prostitution was recognised in the 1830s but despite some rather graphic records of female child prostitution, the same could not be said for boys. In 1835, The London Society for the Protection of Young Females and Prevention of Juvenile Prostitution was founded. In his book *Prostitution in London* (1839), Michael Ryan quoted the Society’s manifesto, which states:

“No one can pass through the streets of London without being struck by the awfully depraved condition of a certain class of the youth of both sexes”.

(Ryan, 1839, pp.119-120).

This quote however, is rare in terms of its reference to ‘both sexes’ and it is only the context of the statement within a book about prostitution which brings us to associate the two. I had at first thought about further exploring Victorian attitudes to homosexuality and the use of rent boys which would initially be a focus for my essay, but through the research, it became apparent that the sexual exploitation of children and the efforts made to conceal the practices and the perpetrators was a reoccurring pattern which allowed ‘troublesome’ characters to be blamed for their part in any criminal acts and deemed deserving of the abuse and exploitation which had befallen them.

“Sexual behaviour with children did not attract the labels of ‘deviance’ or ‘abnormality’ as it has in the latter part of this century; on the contrary, such labels were applied to the victims of child sexual assault, with the construction of a class of ‘immoral’ girls justifying men’s sexual exploitation of them.”

(Cossins, 2000, p.23).

No attention is paid in *Twist*, other than to Oliver, as to how these characters found their way into this lifestyle or what circumstances they endured before they came to be part of a criminal gang; only the fact that their means of a living are menacing to society as a whole. This criminal gang’s ‘jolly japes’ have been highlighted in the many adaptations of *Oliver Twist*. The common theme of the boys being fun-loving and carefree, laughing at the people they were targeting sets the scene for the reader/viewer. The hardships faced by these children, however, are

played down or hidden completely. Openly stating that the child gang members had little option but to partake in criminal activities or else starve would call into question why they were left to fend for themselves in a society that prided itself on its high morality. It was far easier to suggest that it was characters such as these that threatened respectability because of the way in which they lived than to investigate some of the reasons behind them taking place. Focussing on the crime as opposed to the cause of it provided the smoke screen that was required to protect the very reputation of Victorian values. Victorian laws relating to children meant that any child under seven years of age could not be found culpable of any crime and between the ages of seven and fourteen years, children were afforded ‘doli incapax’ status (deemed incapable of forming the intent to commit a crime) and would not usually be subject to capital punishment. However, if it could be proven that a child between seven and fourteen years was ‘doli capax’ (capable of forming the intent to commit a crime), the child could receive the death penalty. Considering these boys were deemed a menace, coupled with the fact that they were orphans and would likely affect the parish purse had they been afforded the luxury of reform, it is difficult to say whether the death penalty would have applied, if indeed the practice of male child prostitution in cases such as these would have been explored. Riddell states:

“Much of what we know about Victorians comes from the work of societies who campaigned for social reform. In the time before the welfare state, the protection of the people most at risk was dealt with by groups of like-minded individuals, normally from the upper and middle classes, who wanted to control and protect ideas of marriage, sex, and social interaction.” Riddell, 2014, p.9).

Wolff suggests that Dickens omitted any specific mention of sexual criminality in order “*to eliminate any expression that could possibly offend*” (Wolff, 1996). The potential reason for this offence is that “*Readers of Oliver Twist did not yet possess a unanimous notion of prostitution*” (Wolff, 1996). This suggests an innocence in the target audience of the novel and to be explicit as to sexual exploitation was to suggest a potential market for it. Only men with disposable incomes could afford to engage in such activities and as previously stated, wealth was associated with respectability and goodness. The connection between money and morals is outlined in Chapter 4 of *Dodgers*:

“Where once he would have seen a plant in the well-dressed gentlemen passing through the streets, he now saw only the danger they posed to him. One word from them and his world could collapse. His experiences over the past few weeks had shown him that poverty was the biggest testimony of guilt. Strings could be pulled by and for anyone who happened to have enough money to conceal the movement of the pulley.” (O’Gorman, 2016, p.24). Unpublished manuscript.

Although most references to prostitution in the Victorian era are gendered, it was recognised that it was not only females who sold sex. It was, however, more palatable to the respectable Victorian to assume that this was the case.

The Offences Against the Person Act of 1828 was in place when *Twist* was written and sodomy was punishable by death until the Offences Against the Person Act of 1861 which reduced punishment to between 10 years and life imprisonment - both with penal servitude. Although the last hanging for sodomy was in 1835, the charge remained a capital indictment until the second Act of 1861.

It is through my research that I have discovered how guarded the Victorians were about child prostitution and the reluctance to openly state its existence. In *The Artful Dodgers*, the demand for and use of rent boys is apparent, though I have not attempted to influence the reader that this was what Dickens was inferring in *Twist*. *Dodgers* suggests only that the boys sold themselves when faced with no other choice. I do not wish to emulate Dickens writing style, merely use the pre-existing characters whose stories had been left uncharted. The boys who are the focus of *Dodgers* merely feature in *Twist*, serving only as a ‘showing’ tool which Dickens uses to give the audience a visual of the societal scene. Only Dodger and Charlie of the gang are named or given any potential fate. Nothing is told of what becomes of the other boys after they are disbanded and *Dodgers* is my own assumption of how the characters could be developed. It was not through any attachment I had to the writing of Dickens which led me to write a sequel to *Twist*, but a genuine interest in the options that would have been available to the children who were not afforded protection because they were viewed as problematic by a society whose values were ultimately to blame for their delinquency.

Despite *Dodgers* depicting the potential events immediately after *Twist*, the opening chapter does follow in a linear fashion. This was not intentional. I had envisaged what is now the first chapter to be approximately half way into the novel, but after discussion with my supervisor, it was decided that due to the emotion drawn from the reader regarding the six year old Edward and the man responsible for his rape and ultimately his death, the scene was hard hitting and captured the imagination of the reader immediately, making it an appropriate choice to open the novel.

My decision to enter the novel with a future scene presented me with the problem of showing how the events in the chapter came to pass. Dodger is imprisoned at the end of *Twist* though his role as a main protagonist in *Dodgers* meant finding a way to release him and create a narrative which would then flow into his and Bet’s setting up of the boarding house. Having researched the penal system of the time and understanding that the likelihood of Dodger being released was minimal, I wrote a scene where Dodger, convinced that his performance in the dock has created doubt about his guilt, is called to speak with an unidentified man who has the authority to overturn his conviction.

“When shall I be released, good Sir? I have wasted enough time here already and wish to get back.”

“Back to what, Dawkins? To thieving and lying and a host of other skulduggery, I should wager. No, lad. I have a proposition for you. If I am to prevent your transportation and allow you back onto my streets, you are to work for me.”

“Work for you, Sir? As what?”

“As an informant.”

(O’Gorman, 2016, p.16.). Unpublished manuscript.

As *Dodgers* begins with a future scene and then returns to the point at which *Twist* ends, I wanted the transition to be smooth and not create interruption of the narrative, so I looked to other literary examples of this. Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a prequel to *Jane Eyre* (1847) and focusses on the character Antoinette Rochester who is depicted in *Jane Eyre* simply as Rochester’s wife who

has descended into madness and resides, with supervision, locked in the attic. Her backstory is not explored in *Jane Eyre*. Her character is not even afforded the right to carry her married name and she is referred to as Bertha Mason. Rhys takes this character and tells her story, which could only be done by portraying events before her depicted madness and long before Jane meets Rochester. Rhys offers a successful portrayal of a lesser known character from an already established novel and the reader is invited to consider a different lead up to events which then come to pass in *Jane Eyre*. Rhys’ style is very different to that of Brontë, yet the narrative is engaging and manages to present a prequel to a book written over a hundred years before. Although *Dodgers* only has one chapter which is set at a future point, it adopts Rhys’ method of using characters established by another author, placing them in a different time frame and offering a deeper characterisation which assists the reader to identify in a way which had not previously been available to them.

Using the recognisable characters established by Dickens and having an opening scene which interrupted the timeline of the narrative were not my only difficulties when researching and writing the novel. Initially I had used a Victorian narrative voice which offered a patronising account of the plight of the characters it described. My rationale for this was that in order to be in a position to have been published at the time of the novel, few authors would have had any real understanding of the predicament of those portrayed, which perpetuated the misguided moral values of the day due to the (highly protected) Victorian values coming through in the narrators voice. In order to be published in the first instance meant a social standing of the author above any of the lower working class characters that were being described and so portraying characters of questionable moral standing was not often done sympathetically. The Victorian narrative voice I

originally used interrupted the flow of the story and the detachment read pompously, not marrying with the telling of the characters stories, so I then changed it to a more modern and less disruptive voice.

Dodgers is written from the points of view of Bet and Dodger. Their dialect differs depending on the situation they are in at the time. Bet adopts an authoritarian tone when she is assuming the role of Madam (Chapter 1) and Dodger uses his extensive vocabulary when speaking to anybody in authority (chapters 2 and 3). Both return to the parlance of the day when speaking to characters that they identify with.

Although using lexis which Dodger would not necessarily have used among his associates, he does retain his East-end accent, creating a consistency for this illustrious character.

“As I no longer ‘ave the guidance of the upstanding Mr Riddleton, it would be easy to cast aspersions upon an unsponsored wretch such as myself ‘oo would be easily disposed of, and the last item I ‘ave to remember my kindly old friend could then be claimed as ‘is own.” (O’Gorman, 2016, p.9).

Unpublished manuscript.

The advantages of using the characters from an existing Dickens’ tale have been that long descriptions about them have not been necessary, meaning that I could jump straight into the story of *The Artful Dodgers* from the first paragraph without needing to explain their backstories, but although this appears to be advantageous, it has not been without problems.

Dodgers opens with an emotive scene which although is very careful not to be overly descriptive, depicts the rape of one of the youngest boys in the gang in the boarding house which Dodger and Bet have set up to allow the boys an element of protection whilst they prostitute themselves. “*There was a crash against the inside of the door followed by a muffled yelp.*” (O’Gorman, 2016, p.6). Unpublished manuscript. After his release from Newgate, when attempting to regroup the younger boys, Dodger finds that several have been reduced to selling themselves in order not to starve. He is horrified not only that this is the case but that the areas where the boys are being taken are dangerous and they are often alone and at the mercy of their abusers who are afforded anonymity and can then walk free. Dodger feels that he and Bet can somehow reduce the harm which the boys are exposed to if the perpetrators know that they are aware of their practices and that the boys they are using are cared for. Predictably, all does not go according to plan and it is not long after the boarding house begins trading that Dodger and Bet are forced to realise that they cannot offer the protection which the boys need.

As previously stated, *Dodgers* is set in 1837, and although I had expected to research the language, geography and lifestyles in order to reflect those of the time, there were a number of areas which prompted research that I had not anticipated. In the opening scene, Bet is getting ready to face the punters. She is approximately 15 years old and yet is the Madam of the boarding house. Her look was an essential part of her role and in order to portray it, she dresses and uses make-up to deceive punters into thinking that she is older than her years. This required my researching the make-up that was available, fashionable and associated with Madams of the day. The intimation that Bet applied make-up did not allow the reader to identify with the characters thoughts and feelings and in order to portray them and allow identification

with the character, I wrote a scene where Bet is getting ready, applying her make-up and reflecting on her predicament.

“She then began to apply the painted mask that she would wear until the last punter left. She started with a white wax and almond oil paste [...] before brushing a mix of rice powder and zinc oxide over the paste. Picking up the bottle of castor oil, she dabbed her finger across the top of the bottle and gently applied it to her eyelids [...]. Checking the mirror, she reached for the beeswax and daubed it across her thin lips, followed by the carmine balm.

Staring at her reflection to ensure she looked every bit the Madam of the house - a role that she was only just beginning to feel comfortable with - she took the dress and began to step into it.” (O’Gorman, 2016, pp.1-2).

Unpublished manuscript.

It was whilst researching for *Dodgers* that I began to notice similar patterns to modern day reports of child sexual exploitation, the victims of which being from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or having histories of challenging behaviour. The child abuse scandal in Rotherham broke in 2014, yet the abuse had been known to the authorities since at least 2010. The children who were targeted were in the care system. There had been multiple reports of abuse, but as many of the victims had been deemed troublesome and their statements ‘unreliable’, the cycle of abuse was allowed to continue.

The Rotherham case indicates that little has changed since the 1830s. Just as those who failed to conform to societal norms in the 1830s were left open to abuse, so are those whose actions sit outside modern day ideologies of how children should

behave. Brown and Barret acknowledge this when looking at the problems faced by social workers of the late twentieth century working in this field:

“Patrick Ayre and David Barrett note that child prostitutes a century later may not be adequately provided for by welfare agencies largely because of the challenge they pose to the victim concept. As they state ‘aggressive, streetwise, anarchic young people who steal and do drugs as well as prostitution do not conform obviously to our idealised image of a child in need.’ (Brown and Barrett, 2002, p.23).

Throughout my research, the obvious failures to protect this vulnerable section of society were of no real surprise to me. As stated previously, there were a host of literary depictions with which I was familiar, but the similarities between the current news stories of child sexual exploitation and the protection of the perpetrators, and the accounts of the same thing almost 200 years before were astounding to me, considering the child protection laws which are in place today. Again, it is a section of society who do not conform to societal norms that are denied protection due to their troublesome and misunderstood behaviours. Brown and Barrett acknowledge this loss of victimhood. Writing about the organisations where child victims of sexual abuse reside, they state:

“The real young girls who emerge from the interstices of that rhetoric have two characteristics. In the eyes of their would-be reformers, they are unmanageable and flighty. In the privacy of their minute books and printed annual reports, organisations which managed rescue or ‘preventative’ homes reveal that one of their biggest problems was controlling the unruly behaviour

of the girls with whom they came into contact” (Brown and Barrett, 2002, p.23).

Rotherham is just one of many stories that appear in the news on an almost weekly basis where the victims of sexual abuse are from a section of society which can be deemed as vulnerable, but by continuing to overlook the children who display difficult behaviours and not offering a safe and appropriate environment, are we not creating a perfect victim for potential abusers who seek out those who experience a lack of love and understanding? Grooming is made all the more simple when an obvious and continual frustration and misunderstanding is apparent within the victim’s lives.

There is much further research to be undertaken in this area but I am beginning to see patterns that go back centuries in terms of the abuse of the vulnerable by those who hold power over them, and I am baffled as to why in 2016 that as a society, we appear to have learned few lessons regarding how vulnerable those who are seen as troublesome are left.

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Appendix 1 – Glossary of Terms

Chapter 1

Swell – fashionably dressed male

Scold - a person, esp a woman, who constantly finds fault

Heavy-swell – smart, fashionable

Barker - pistol

Morrice – get a move on!

Younker – young one

Rum – odd, queer

Covey - fellow

File – cunning fellow

Persuader – club

Neddy – life-preserver; stick, or bludgeon loaded with lead

Kinchin – child

Lathering – beating, thrashing

Amain – with full force, violently

Yuller – ‘yellow metal’, gold (also a nickname of one of the boy’s)

Turn-up – fight, commotion

Chapter 2

Codger – fellow

Green – Ignorant, naïve

Lagging – transportation

Flat - Fool, naïve person

Quoddin’ - serving a prison sentence

Fee-Faw-Fum - nonsense fit only to terrify a child

Cove/covey - fellow

Milling – boxing

Gammon – nonsense

Regimentals – prison clothes

Beak - magistrate

Pound, to – to wager

Magpie – halfpenny (twelve pence in a shilling)

Stow, to – to leave off (talking)

Stone Jug – Prison; Newgate Jail

Top-sawyer – first rate

Plummy – excellent

Blunt – cash

Prime – first rate

Swell – fashionably dressed man

Prig – pickpocket, thief

Fogle – handkerchief

Fogle-hunter - pickpocket

Well-plucked - full of pluck

Heavy-swell - smart, fashionable

Plants - suitable target for crime

Flimp - rob, usually by a team of thieves

Booty, to play – to betray

Dippers - pick pockets

Busters – burglars

Peach - inform against

Fence - receiver of stolen goods

Fancy work - [probably] making money by pimping and prostitution

Earwig - draw into confessing

Chapter 3

Pumblechook – Human ass

Knocker-up – Man who woke people up by tapping on windows to ensure they weren’t late
for work

Stone Jug – Prison; Newgate Jail

Coffee-Sister – Malignant gossip

Blow upon, to – to inform against

Leg-bail, to give – to escape

Fogle-hunter – Pickpocket

Scragged – Hung

Jack Ketch – Hangman

Move – trick, plot

London Standard – Newspaper published 1827-1900

London Dispatch – Newspaper published 1836-1839

Chapter 4

The Three Cripples – tavern in OT

Stump, to – to pay up

Swipe – weak beer

Pad the hoof, to – to go on foot, walk

Basket of Oranges – pretty woman

Barney – argument, fight, commotion

Heckling – mild bullying

Dollymop – prostitute

Dough – pregnant

Boot-black brigade – legitimate shoe/boot polishers

Drain – drink (usually gin)

Knapped – pregnant

Grafting – acquisition of goods by dishonest means

Mugs – faces

Judy - a woman, specifically a prostitute

Chapter 5

Costermonger – trader of popular and varying goods

Shallow – costermonger’s cart

Knee trembler - an act of sexual intercourse between people in a standing position.

Brickbat – broken brick (used as missile)

Cove - fellow

Buggering - sodomy

Frigging – masturbation

Crib – house; thieves’ hideout

Barney – argument, fight, commotion

Ken - house; thieves’ hideout

Trap – policeman

Hobbadehoy – a youth who has ceased to regard himself as a boy and is not yet regarded as a man

Fastness – secure place; place of safety

Chapter 6

Beer and skittles – good times

Slang cove – showman

Bottle – arse (rhyming slang – bottle and glass)

Quack – doctor

Outsider - An instrument, resembling needle nosed pliers, used for turning a key in a lock from the wrong side.

Sneaking – stealing

Wiping – thieving

Chapter 7

Mrs Fubbs (Parlour) – vagina

Chapter 8

Line, to get into a – to draw into a criminal plot

Magpie – halfpenny (twelve pence to a shilling

Nabbed – seized or arrested

Castor – fur hat

Huffle – fellatio

Molly – homosexual man

Chapter 10

Pulley Hawley – sexual intercourse

