

CHAPTER I



Among other public buildings in a certain town, there was one common to most towns, great or small: a workhouse. And in this workhouse was born the item of mortality known as Oliver Twist.

Although being born in a workhouse is not the most fortunate circumstance that can possibly befall a human being, in this particular instance, it was the best thing for Oliver Twist that could have occurred. There was considerable difficulty getting Oliver to take on the job of respiration. For some time he lay gasping on a little wool mattress, poised between this world and the next, the balance in favor of the latter.

There being nobody nearby but an old pauper woman, who was rather misty with beer, and a parish surgeon, Oliver and Nature fought out the point between them. The result was that, after a few struggles, Oliver breathed, sneezed, and proceeded to alert the workhouse of its new burden, by setting up a loud cry.

As Oliver gave this first proof of the free and proper action of his lungs, the patchwork coverlet that was carelessly flung over the iron bedstead rustled. The pale face of a young woman raised feebly from the pillow, and a faint voice said, "Let me see the child, and then die."

As the young woman spoke, the surgeon rose, and advancing to the bed, said, with more kindness than might have been expected of him, "Oh, you must not talk about dying yet."

“Lor bless her dear heart, no!” interjected the nurse. “When she has lived as long as I have, sir, and had thirteen children of her own, and all of ’em dead except two, and them in the wurkus with me, she’ll know better than to talk on in that way! Think what it is to be a mother, there’s a dear young lamb.”

The patient shook her head, and stretched out her hand towards the child. The surgeon deposited it in her arms. She pressed her cold white lips passionately on its forehead, gazed wildly round, shuddered, fell back—and died. They rubbed her chest, hands, and temples, but the blood had stopped forever.

“It’s all over, Mrs. Thingummy!” said the surgeon at last.

“Ah, poor dear, so it is!” said the nurse, as she stooped to take up the child.

“You needn’t mind sending up to me, if the child cries, nurse,” said the surgeon. “It’s likely it will be troublesome. Give it a little gruel if it is.” He put on his hat, and added, “she was a good-looking girl, too. Where did she come from?”

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

The surgeon leaned over the body, and raised the left hand. “The old story,” he said, shaking his head. “No wedding ring, I see. Ah! Good night!”

The medical gentleman walked away to dinner, and the nurse sat down on a low chair before the fire, and proceeded to dress the infant.

What an excellent example of the power of dress, young Oliver Twist was! Wrapped in the blanket, he

might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar. But now that he was enveloped in the old calico robes that had grown yellow from use, he fell into his place at once—the orphan of a workhouse—the humble, half-starved drudge—to be cuffed and buffeted through the world—despised by all, and pitied by none.

Oliver cried lustily. If he could have known that he was an orphan, left to the tender mercies of church wardens and overseers, perhaps he would have cried the louder.

CHAPTER 2

Oliver was sent off to a branch workhouse, where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor laws rolled about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing, under the guidance of an elderly woman.

She received the culprits for the sum of sevenpence-halfpenny per small head per week, a good round diet for a child. But the elderly woman knew what was good for children, and she had an accurate perception of what was good for herself. So, she used the greater part of the weekly stipend for her own needs, and raised the children on a smaller allowance than was originally provided for them.

A rather unfortunate result usually accompanied the system of the woman caring for Oliver Twist. At the moment when a child had learned to exist upon the smallest possible portion of the weakest possible food, it did happen in eight and a half cases out of ten, either that it sickened from want and cold, or fell into the fire from neglect, or got half-smothered by accident. In any of these cases, the miserable little being was usually summoned into another world.

Occasionally, after a parish child had been inadvertently scalded to death when there happened to be a washing—though the accident was scarce, a washing being rare in the farm—the jury would take it into their heads to ask troublesome questions. But this rudeness was overcome by the evidence of the surgeon, and the testimony of the beadle. The former

always opened the body and found nothing inside (which was probable indeed), and the latter invariably promised whatever the parish wanted. Besides, the board made periodical visits to the farm, and always sent the beadle the day before, to say they were going. The children were neat and clean when they went, and what more would the people have!

Nevertheless, this system of farming did not produce an extraordinary crop. Oliver Twist's ninth birthday found him a pale thin child, somewhat small in stature and circumference. But nature had implanted a good sturdy spirit in Oliver, and it may have been responsible for his having any ninth birthday at all. He was spending it in the coal cellar with a select party of two other young gentleman, who, after receiving a sound thrashing, had been locked up for claiming to be hungry. Meanwhile, Mrs. Mann, the good lady of the house, was unexpectedly startled by the arrival of Mr. Bumble, the beadle, striving to undo the latch of the garden gate.

"Goodness gracious! Is that you, Mr. Bumble, sir?" said Mrs. Mann, thrusting her head out of the window in seeming ecstasies of joy. "(Susan, take Oliver and them two brats upstairs, and wash 'em directly.)—Mr. Bumble, how glad I am to see you!"

Now, Mr. Bumble was a fat, bad-tempered man. So, instead of responding to this open-hearted greeting, he gave the little gate a tremendous shake, and then a kick, which could have been delivered from no leg but a beadle's.

"Lor, only think!" said Mrs. Mann, running out—"That I should have forgotten that the gate was bolted on the inside, on account of them dear children! Walk in, sir, pray, Mr. Bumble, do, sir."

“Do you think this respectful or proper conduct, Mrs. Mann,” inquired Mr. Bumble, grasping his cane, “to keep the parish officers waiting at your garden gate, when they come here upon parochial business with the parochial orphans? Are you aware, Mrs. Mann, that you are, as I may say, a parochial delegate, and a stipendiary?”

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

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

Mrs. Mann ushered the beadle into a small parlor, where she placed a seat for him and ceremoniously put his cocked hat and cane on the table before him. Mr. Bumble wiped his forehead, glanced complacently at the cocked hat, and smiled.

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

“Not a drop,” said Mr. Bumble, waving his right hand in a dignified manner.

“I think you will,” said Mrs. Mann, who had noticed the tone of the refusal, and the accompanying gesture. “Just a leetle drop.”

“What is it?” inquired the beadle.

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

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

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

“No,” said Mr. Bumble approvingly, “you could not. You are a humane woman, Mrs. Mann. I shall mention it to the board, Mrs. Mann. I drink your health with cheerfulness,” and he swallowed half of his drink.

“And now about business,” said the beadle. “The child that was half-baptized Oliver Twist is nine years old today.”

“Bless him!” said Mrs. Mann, inflaming her left eye with the corner of her apron.

“And despite a reward of ten pound, which was afterwards increased to twenty pound, and the most supernat’ral exertions on the part of this parish,” said Bumble, “we have never been able to discover who is his father, or his mother’s origin, name, or condition.”

Mrs. Mann asked, “How comes he to have any name at all, then?”

The beadle drew himself up with great pride, and said, “I invented it.”

“You, Mr. Bumble!”

“I, Mrs. Mann. We name our foundlings in alphabetical order. The last was a S—Swubble, I named him. This was a T—Twist, I named him. The next one will be Unwin, and the next Vilkins.”

“Why, you’re quite a literary character, sir!” said Mrs. Mann.

“Well,” said the beadle, “perhaps I may be.” He

finished the gin and water, and added, "Oliver being now too old to remain here, the board have determined to have him back into the house. So let me see him at once."

"I'll fetch him directly," said Mrs. Mann. Oliver, having had by this time as much dirt removed as could be scrubbed off in one washing, was led into the room.

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

Oliver made a bow.

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

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

"Will she go with me?" inquired poor Oliver.

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

This was no great consolation to the child. Young as he was, however, he had sense enough to make a show of great regret at going away. Mrs. Mann gave him a thousand embraces, and, what Oliver wanted a great deal more, a piece of bread and butter, lest he should seem too hungry when he got to the workhouse.

Oliver was then led away by Mr. Bumble from the wretched home where one kind word or look had never lit the gloom of his infant years. And yet

he burst into an agony of childish grief, as the cottage gate closed after him. Wretched as were the little companions in misery he was leaving behind, they were the only friends he had ever known. A sense of his loneliness in the great wide world sank into the child's heart for the first time.

Mr. Bumble walked on with long strides. Little Oliver, firmly grasping his gold-laced cuff, trotted beside him.

Oliver had not been within the walls of the workhouse a quarter of an hour, and had scarcely consumed a second slice of bread, when Mr. Bumble, who had handed him over to the care of an old woman, returned. He informed Oliver that he was to appear before the board immediately.

Mr. Bumble gave him a tap on the head with his cane to wake him up, and another on the back to make him lively. He then conducted him into a large white-washed room, where eight or ten fat gentlemen were sitting round a table. At the top of the table, seated in an armchair rather higher than the rest, was a particularly fat gentleman with a round, red face.

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

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

Oliver was frightened at the sight of so many gentlemen, which made him tremble, and the beadle gave him another tap behind, which made him cry. These two causes made him answer in a low and hesitating voice, whereupon a gentleman in a white

waistcoat said he was a fool.

“Boy,” said the gentleman in the high chair, “listen to me. You know you’ve got no father or mother, and that you were brought up by the parish?”

“Yes, sir,” replied Oliver, weeping bitterly.

“What are you crying for?” inquired the gentleman in the white waistcoat.

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

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

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

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

For the combination of both these blessings in the one simple process of picking oakum, Oliver bowed low, and was then hurried away to a large room, where, on a rough, hard bed, he sobbed himself to sleep.

Poor Oliver! He little thought, as he lay sleeping, that the board had arrived at a decision that would determine his fortune. But they had.

The members of this board were philosophical men, and when they turned their attention to the workhouse, they found out at once that the poor

people liked it! It was a regular place of public entertainment for the poorer classes, a tavern where there was nothing to pay, where it was all play and no work.

So the board established the rule that all poor people should have the choice of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it. They contracted with the water works to lay on an unlimited supply of water, and with a corn factory to supply small quantities of oatmeal, and issued three meals of thin gruel a day, with an onion twice a week, and half a roll on Sundays. They made a great many other wise and humane regulations: kindly undertook to divorce poor married people; and, instead of compelling a man to support his family, took his family away from him, and made him a bachelor!

For the first six months after Oliver Twist arrived, the system was in full operation. It was rather expensive at first, because of the increase in the undertaker's bill, and the necessity of taking in the clothes of all the paupers, which fluttered loosely on their wasted bodies. But the population of the workhouse thinned as well as the paupers themselves, and the board were in ecstasies.

The boys were fed in a large stone hall, with a pot at one end, out of which the master, assisted by one or two women, ladled the gruel at mealtimes. Of this festive meal each boy had one bowl, and no more—except on occasions of great public rejoicing, when he had two ounces and a quarter of bread besides.

The bowls never wanted washing. The boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again. When they had performed this operation (which

never took long, the spoons being nearly as large as the bowls), they would sit staring at the pot with eager eyes, meanwhile sucking their fingers most diligently, to catch any spare gruel.

Oliver Twist and his companions suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months. At last they got so voracious and wild with hunger, that a council was held, and lots were cast on who should walk up to the master after supper that evening, and ask for more. It fell to Oliver Twist.

The evening arrived, and the boys took their places. The master, in his cook's uniform, stationed himself at the pot. His pauper assistants arranged themselves behind him. The gruel was served out, and a long grace was said. The gruel disappeared, and the boys whispered to each other, and winked at Oliver, while his neighbors nudged him. He was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table, and, advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said, somewhat alarmed at his own audacity, "Please, sir, I want some more."

The master, a fat, healthy man, turned pale, gazing in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds, and then clung for support to the pot. The assistants were paralyzed with wonder, the boys with fear.

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

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

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

The board were sitting in solemn meeting when Mr. Bumble rushed into the room, and addressing

the gentleman in the high chair, said, "Mr. Limbkins, I beg your pardon, sir! Oliver Twist has asked for more!"

There was a general start. Horror struck every face.

"For more!" said Mr. Limbkins. "Compose yourself, Bumble. Do I understand that he asked for more, after he had eaten the supper allotted to him?"

"He did, sir," replied Bumble.

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

Nobody contradicted the gentleman's opinion. Oliver was ordered into confinement, and a sign was next morning posted outside the gate, offering a reward of five pounds to anybody who would take Oliver Twist off the hands of the parish. In other words, five pounds and Oliver Twist were offered to any man or woman who wanted an apprentice to any trade, business, or calling.