

Charles Dickens

Oliver Twist



Retold by
KATHARINE LANG

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OLIVER TWIST

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OLIVER TWIST

BY
CHARLES DICKENS

ADAPTED BY
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PREFACE

Charles Dickens (1812-70) was not only a great story-teller, but he also tried, through his novels, to make people aware of the social evils of the day. In *Oliver Twist*, one of his best-loved stories, he tells of the injustice and cruelty suffered by poor people; how orphan children were brought up in the appalling conditions of the poorhouses, where they were starved and neglected. The scene in which the young Oliver, on behalf of his ill-treated companions, asks for more food, is one of the best-known and most moving incidents in literature. In *Oliver Twist* too, Dickens takes his readers into the shady, underworld of Victorian London, where innocent children were taught by evil men to steal for a living.

The story of young Oliver Twist, and of how he triumphed over his tragic upbringing and finally found security and happiness, is a gripping tale told by a master of the craft of story-telling. But it is more than that—it is also a social document in which Dickens roused the consciences of his readers to the injustices around them.

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CHAPTER ONE

OLIVER ASKS FOR MORE

ABOUT the year 1837, in a certain English town a baby boy was born in the local poorhouse*. For several minutes after his birth, the sickly baby struggled ^{for 14} feebly to breathe. The doctor, who was paid only a small sum by the town to look after the poor, and the old poorhouse woman who acted as nurse, did little to help him. However, the child, Oliver, won his first lonely battle in life and, setting up a feeble cry, announced to the poorhouse that it had yet another mouth to feed. As the baby gave this first cry, his mother stirred under the thin ²⁰ coverlet on the iron bedstead ^{10/1830} and muttered feebly, 'Let me see the child, and die.'

The doctor turned round from the small fire where he was warming himself and said with unexpected kindness, 'Oh, you mustn't talk about dying yet.'

'Bless your heart, no!' said the wretched nurse, hastily putting down the bottle whose contents she was trying, 'wait till you've had thirteen children, like me, and seen them all die except two, and those two in the poorhouse with me!'

But it was no good. The mother shook her head,

stretched out her arms for her child and the doctor gave it to her. She kissed it ^{desperately} ~~desperately~~, then put her hands to her face and fell back dead. *XVII-47*

‘It’s all over,’ said the doctor, when they had done what they could to revive her, and had failed. ‘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’d walked a long way, for her shoes were worn out, but nobody knows where she came from or where she was going.’

The doctor 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!’ and he went away to his dinner. The nurse sat down before the fire and dressed the baby in the old cotton robes worn by all poorhouse infants. Oliver cried loudly. If he could have known he was an orphan—a poorhouse child, ^{the} ~~despised~~ ^{by} all and pitied by none, he might have cried even louder.

*

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*

Oliver was given the surname Twist by Mr Bumble, the town beadle*. The beadle named the nameless infants of the poorhouse in alphabetical order, and he had reached the letter ‘T’. This official was a stupid, fat and self-important man, but unfortunately he had great power over the miserable poor people of the town. He ill-treated

and starved the poorhouse inhabitants, and when anything went wrong or someone died, he was quite prepared to swear to whatever would keep the jury from asking any awkward questions.

His early childhood was spent under the care of an elderly woman, Mrs Mann, who took in numbers of such destitute orphans on payment by the town authorities of sevenpence halfpenny for each child for each week. The greater part of this money Mrs Mann used for herself and she did not feed or clothe the miserable children at all adequately. Great numbers of them died. But whenever the authorities visited the house they sent the beadle to say they were coming so that all the children were neat and clean by the time they saw them.

It is not surprising, then, that by the time Oliver was nine, he was a pale, thin child, very small for his age. He was spending his birthday locked in the coal cellar with two other boys, after a sound thrashing, for the great crime of daring to be hungry, when Mr Bumble, the beadle, arrived. 'The child that was half-baptized Oliver Twist is nine years old today,' he announced to Mrs Mann, who had greeted him with a great show of false pleasure.

'Bless him!' said Mrs Mann, pretending to wipe tears from her eyes.

'And in spite of an offered reward of ten pounds and great efforts by the town authorities we've

never been able to discover who is his father, or what was his mother's name or family. Oliver's now too old to remain here, so I've come to fetch him back to the poorhouse. Let me see him at once.'

'I'll fetch him directly,' said Mrs Mann and went out. Oliver, who had been hastily and inadequately ^{scrubbed} scrubbed by Mrs Mann's slovenly helper, was led into the room. Mrs Mann, who wished to impress Mr Bumble with her love for her charges, wept over him and embraced him; she gave Oliver a slice of bread lest he should appear too hungry when he got to the poorhouse. With the poorhouse cap on his head, Oliver was led away in tears. He wept for loneliness at parting from the only friends he had ever had—his little companions in misery in the wretched home, where no one had ever given him a kind word or look.

At the poorhouse, Oliver appeared before the board which ^{administered} administered it and was told that he had come there to be educated and taught a useful trade since he had no father or mother. Therefore he would start to pick oakum* at six o'clock the next morning. 'I hope you say your prayers every night,' said one gentleman to Oliver, 'and pray for the people who feed you and take care of you—like a Christian.' 'Yes, sir,' ^{stammered} stammered poor Oliver, whom nobody had ever taught to do anything, let alone pray, and he bowed low to the board,

and was hurried away to a large dormitory, where on a rough hard bed he sobbed himself to sleep.

The board of the poorhouse had recently decided that life for the inmates must be made even more unpleasant for them than it had been before, if that were possible. They were to be slowly starved in the hope that they would leave the poorhouse and the town would no longer have to support them from public funds. This system was put into full operation during the first six months after Oliver's arrival there.

The boys had three meals a day. At each one the master of the poorhouse served each boy with one bowl of watery porridge. Now growing boys have good appetites and this slow starvation had its effect. One tall boy, who had known better times, was heard to say that, unless he had another bowl of porridge each day, he might eat the boy, a very small one, who slept next to him. As all the boys were quite wild with hunger, they believed him. A meeting was held and the boys drew lots to decide who should walk up to the master after supper to ask for more. The lot fell to Oliver Twist.

The evening came, the porridge was served as usual, and quickly eaten. The boys whispered to each other and his neighbours pushed Oliver to his feet.

Quite reckless with misery and hunger, he rose from the table, walked up to the master, bowl in



George Cruikshank

Oliver Twist asking for more

hand, and said, 'Please, sir, I want some more.'

The master was a fat, healthy man, but he turned quite pale on hearing these words.

'What!' he said, astonished.

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

The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head, seized him by the arms and shouted for the beadle.

The board were holding a meeting, when Mr Bumble rushed into the room in great excitement.

'Oliver Twist has asked for more!' he said.

'Asked for *more!*' exclaimed the Chairman, 'and *after* supper!'

'That boy will be hung, I know he will!' said a gentleman in a white waistcoat.

Oliver was at once locked up to spend the night alone. Next morning a notice was put up outside the gate offering five pounds to anyone who would take Oliver off the hands of the poorhouse.

For a week Oliver remained locked up. Every other day, he was carried to the hall where the other boys ate and publicly beaten as a warning to the others. Nobody seemed to want him, even with the reward of five pounds.

At last, one evening, Mr Bumble came to fetch him. Oliver's cap was put on his head, his worldly goods*, in a small brown paper parcel, were put into his hands and he was led away to a new scene of suffering. Mr Sowerberry, the local undertaker*, had agreed to take Oliver to work for him.

Mr Sowerberry was a tall thin man, dressed always in black, as suited his trade. His wife was a short, thin, unkind-looking woman. They were both unkind to Oliver; and Charlotte, the maid, and Noah Claypole, the other ^{apprentice} ~~apprentice~~, were also unkind to him. He was ^{kept} ~~cursed~~, beaten, fed on ^{scrap} ~~scraps~~ which the dog refused and made to sleep under the workshop bench among the ^{coffins} ~~coffins~~. He did not like his work, but he could do nothing except stay there for several months.

Then one day at dinner-time, Noah went too far with his cruelty.

‘How’s your mother, poorhouse?’ he said.

‘She’s dead,’ replied Oliver. ‘Don’t you dare say anything about her to me!’

Noah, pleased that Oliver was angry, continued to tease him. Suddenly Oliver could bear it no longer. Red with ^{fury} ~~fury~~, he upset the table and attacked Noah, who shouted for help. Charlotte and Mrs Sowerberry came running and between the three of them, they beat and scratched and overpowered poor Oliver and threw him into the cellar and locked the door. Noah was sent to fetch Mr Bumble; Mr Sowerberry came home and, in spite of the fact he himself almost liked Oliver, he was forced by his wife to beat him. Mr Bumble, not to be outdone, beat him again. After which Oliver was locked up for the rest of the day with a slice of bread.

That night, among the coffins, Oliver wept bitterly. When the first light of dawn showed through the shutters, he rose, silently unbarred the door and crept out into the empty street. Then he started up the hill out of the little town. Oliver had determined to run away!

CHAPTER TWO

FAGIN AND THE BOYS

EARLY on the seventh morning after he started out from Mr Sowerberry's, Oliver limped wearily into the little town of Barnet, near London. He had decided in the early stage of his terrible journey to go to London, which he knew to be a large place, and where he thought he would be safe from Mr Bumble. So there he sat, in Barnet, with bleeding feet and covered with dirt, on a cold doorstep, too tired to beg. People passed him by, hurrying about their own business. Some looked at him, but no one bothered to speak to the lonely little boy. After a while Oliver realised that a boy of about his own age was looking at him from across the street. Oliver stared back at him. He saw a small, dirty boy with sharp, ugly eyes and bow legs*, dressed in a man's clothes which were much too big for him.

This boy now crossed the street, came up to Oliver and said, ‘Hullo, my lad. What’s the trouble?’

‘I’m very hungry and tired,’ replied Oliver, tears coming to his eyes. ‘I’ve walked a long way. I’ve been walking for seven days.’

‘You need food,’ said the young stranger, ‘and you shall have it. Up you come!’ Helping Oliver to his feet, he led him to a nearby shop and bought ham and bread. Then he led the way to a small public-house* where he settled Oliver down to a pot of beer and the food. After a long and hearty meal he asked Oliver’s name.

‘Going to London?’ inquired the strange boy.

‘Yes,’ said Oliver.

‘Got anywhere to go? Or any money?’

‘No,’ said Oliver.

‘Come on, then,’ said the boy, whose name turned out to be Jack Dawkins. ‘My friends call me the Artful Dodger*. I know a respectable old gentleman in London, called Fagin, who’ll give you lodgings for nothing, if I introduce you.’

Oliver, much strengthened by the meal, agreed to accompany Jack, and the boys set out for London, which they did not reach until after dark. The Dodger led Oliver through a ^{mez}maze of dirty, evil-smelling streets, full of screaming children and drunken men and women. Oliver, terrified at what he saw, was just considering whether he