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CHARLES DICKENS

Oliver Twist

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Thurston

Oliver Twist

by

CHARLES DICKENS



AIRMONT BOOKS

22 EAST 60TH STREET • NEW YORK 22,

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ISBN: 0-8049-0009-4

AIRMONT PUBLISHING CO., INC., 22 East 60th St., New York 22, N.Y.

Oliver Twist



CHARLES DICKENS

In the preface to the third edition of *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens wrote:

"I wished to show in Oliver, the principle of good surviving through every adverse circumstance and triumphing at last."

Despite the dingy workhouse in which Oliver was born, the ill-treatment he received as a result of "daring to ask for more" at supper and the subsequent hardship of his journey to London and his misadventures there among thieves and cutthroats, his narrow escape from death at the hands of Monks and Fagin, good does in fact triumph and Oliver survives to inherit his birthright and find the security with Mr. Brownlow that he so cherishes.

In this, his second major work, Charles Dickens has reflected some of his own earlier life and the darker side of his own character.

Born in 1812, the second of eight sons, he quickly learned the meaning of poverty in an age when the destitute were considered no better than animals. His father was a bankrupt who was committed to Marshalsea debtors' prison. His mother was able to obtain some support for the family by teaching, but Charles's help was essential, and, at an early age, he was sent to work in the blacking warehouse which he describes so graphically in his autobiographical novel, *David Copperfield*. There, and at the

debtors' prison where the family spent its Sundays, he learned of the grimy side of the London of those days.

In 1824, Dickens' father was released from prison: Charles was able to obtain a further two years' education at private school, after which he entered the office of Mr. Blackmore, a Grays Inn solicitor. He spent his spare time reading in the British Museum and mastering shorthand, which he did so thoroughly that he was able to become a Parliamentary reporter.

In 1833, Dickens had his first work published, *The Sketches of Boz*. This was followed shortly by *Pickwick Papers*, which was to establish him as a writer. In *Pickwick*, Dickens was able to express the boisterous, flamboyant side of his nature, and the public loved him for it. Just as in *Oliver Twist*, his next complete work, he showed the melancholy side—his despair at the utter evil that can exist in people and his misery at the plight of the poor. Much in the novel is black and claustrophobic—the characters of Fagin and Bill Sykes; the dingy, dirty rooms where Oliver is forever confined; the narrow passages where he flees from the unfriendly mobs who pursue him; and the masses' thirst for blood at the eventual capture of Fagin and Sykes. Nevertheless, Dickens' natural belief in the triumph of justice prevails and wins at the last.

G. K. Chesterton, the famous British essayist, has said of Oliver:

"He is pathetic because he is an optimist. The whole tragedy of that incident is in the fact that he does expect the universe to be kind to him, that he does believe that he is living in a just world."

Chesterton goes on to compare Oliver's life with the French Revolution, which influenced Dickens so greatly and about which he later wrote one of his most famous novels, *A Tale of Two Cities*. He says that because the French peasants were better off than the peasants of other countries, they were also full of expectations—"they were the one Parish boy who innocently asked for more."

In 1836, Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, eldest daughter of George Hogarth, Office Manager of *The Evening Chronicle*, who had helped him to further his career. Catherine was sweet and gentle and provided a balance to Charles's mercurial disposition. After their first child was born, Catherine's younger sister, Mary, came to live with the family, and it was she who epitomized, for Dickens, the perfect woman. When Mary died at the age of seventeen, Dickens was heartbroken. His description of Rose Maylie on her deathbed in *Oliver Twist* is not only a good

example of his romantic conception of ideal woman in particular, but a general exposé of his feelings for his sister-in-law.

"A creature as fair and innocent of guile as one of God's own angels, fluttered between life and death. Oh! who could hope, when the distant world to which she was akin, half opened to her view, that she would return to the sorrow and calamity of this!"

Nevertheless, Dickens continued to write fervently and productively: *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Barnaby Rudge*, and *The Old Curiosity Shop* followed in short order. He was by now thoroughly established as a writer, and his inimitable prose had taken on the Dickensian trademark: excellent and perceptive caricatures; vivid descriptions; a touch of irony; an overdose of pathos, and above all, a play on the social conscience of his public.

In 1842, Dickens made a trip to North America and was given a tumultuous welcome wherever he appeared with readings of his own works. On his return, he satirized American democracy in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which created an uproar among Americans, though they subsequently forgave him, for on his second American tour, fifteen years later, he was again well received.

In the meantime, a continuous flow of books appeared from his pen: among others, *Dombey and Son*, which he wrote in Switzerland; *David Copperfield*, his autobiographical novel; *Bleak House*, satirizing the British courts, where he was able to draw on his early experiences in Mr. Blackmore's offices. In *Hard Times*, he decried the school system; in *A Christmas Carol*, he caricatured an English Victorian Christmas; and followed it by *Little Dorrit*.

In 1859, appeared the story of the French Revolution *A Tale of Two Cities* which, because it was written in the past and was made up of genuine tragedy rather than bathos, was one of the least characteristic but most successful of his works.

He followed *A Tale of Two Cities* with what has been acclaimed by many as the finest of his works, *Great Expectations*, and then *Mutual Friends*.

In 1870, at the age of fifty-eight, while writing *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Charles Dickens died at Gad's Hill, Kent, England, in the home that he loved so much and had waited so long to acquire.

In *David Copperfield*, in his own words, can be found an apt epitaph to one of England's best-loved writers:

"Never to put my hand to anything in which I could not throw my whole self; and never to affect depreciation of my work whatever it was: I find now to have been my golden rule."

CONTENTS

1. TREATS OF THE PLACE WHERE OLIVER TWIST WAS BORN, AND OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES ATTENDING HIS BIRTH 1
2. TREATS OF OLIVER TWIST'S GROWTH, EDUCATION, AND BOARD 3
3. RELATES HOW OLIVER TWIST WAS VERY NEAR GETTING A PLACE WHICH WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN A SINECURE 11
4. OLIVER, BEING OFFERED ANOTHER PLACE, MAKES HIS FIRST ENTRY INTO PUBLIC LIFE 18
5. OLIVER MINGLES WITH NEW ASSOCIATES. GOING TO A FUNERAL FOR THE FIRST TIME, HE FORMS AN UNFAVORABLE NOTION OF HIS MASTER'S BUSINESS 23
6. OLIVER, BEING GOADED BY THE TAUNTS OF NOAH, ROUSES INTO ACTION, AND RATHER ASTONISHES HIM 32
7. OLIVER CONTINUES REFRACTORY 36
8. OLIVER WALKS TO LONDON. HE ENCOUNTERS ON THE ROAD A STRANGE SORT OF YOUNG GENTLEMAN 41
9. CONTAINING FURTHER PARTICULARS CONCERNING THE PLEASANT OLD GENTLEMAN, AND HIS HOPEFUL PUPILS 47
10. OLIVER BECOMES BETTER ACQUAINTED WITH THE CHARACTERS OF HIS NEW ASSOCIATES; AND PURCHASES EXPERIENCE AT A HIGH PRICE. BEING A SHORT, BUT VERY IMPORTANT CHAPTER, IN THIS HISTORY 52
11. TREATS OF MR. FANG THE POLICE MAGISTRATE; AND FURNISHES A SLIGHT SPECIMEN OF HIS MODE OF ADMINISTERING JUSTICE 56
12. IN WHICH OLIVER IS TAKEN BETTER CARE OF THAN HE EVER WAS BEFORE. AND IN WHICH THE NARRATIVE REVERTS TO THE MERRY OLD GENTLEMAN AND HIS YOUTHFUL FRIENDS 62
13. SOME NEW ACQUAINTANCES ARE INTRODUCED TO THE INTELLIGENT READER, CONNECTED WITH WHOM, VARIOUS PLEASANT MATTERS ARE RELATED, APPERTAINING TO THIS HISTORY 69

14. COMPRISING FURTHER PARTICULARS OF OLIVER'S STAY AT MR. BROWNLOW'S, WITH THE REMARKABLE PREDICTION WHICH ONE MR. GRIMWIG UTTERED CONCERNING HIM, WHEN HE WENT OUT ON AN ERRAND 75
15. SHOWING HOW VERY FOND OF OLIVER TWIST, THE MERRY OLD JEW AND MISS NANCY WERE 84
16. RELATES WHAT BECAME OF OLIVER TWIST, AFTER HE HAD BEEN CLAIMED BY NANCY 89
17. OLIVER'S DESTINY CONTINUING UNPROFITIOUS, BRINGS A GREAT MAN TO LONDON TO INJURE HIS REPUTATION 96
18. HOW OLIVER PASSED HIS TIME IN THE IMPROVING SOCIETY OF HIS REPUTABLE FRIENDS 103
19. IN WHICH A NOTABLE PLAN IS DISCUSSED AND DETERMINED ON 110
20. WHEREIN OLIVER IS DELIVERED OVER TO MR. WILLIAM SIKES 117
21. THE EXPEDITION 123
22. THE BURGLARY 128
23. WHICH CONTAINS THE SUBSTANCE OF A PLEASANT CONVERSATION BETWEEN MR. BUMBLE AND A LADY; AND SHOWS THAT EVEN A BEADLE MAY BE SUSCEPTIBLE ON SOME POINTS 133
24. TREATS OF A VERY POOR SUBJECT. BUT IS A SHORT ONE, AND MAY BE FOUND OF IMPORTANCE IN THIS HISTORY 139
25. WHEREIN THIS HISTORY REVERTS TO MR. FAGIN AND COMPANY 143
26. IN WHICH A MYSTERIOUS CHARACTER APPEARS UPON THE SCENE; AND MANY THINGS, INSEPARABLE FROM THIS HISTORY, ARE DONE AND PERFORMED 148
27. ATONES FOR THE UNPOLITENESS OF A FORMER CHAPTER; WHICH DESERTED A LADY, MOST UNCEREMONIOUSLY 158
28. LOOKS AFTER OLIVER, AND PROCEEDS WITH HIS ADVENTURES 163
29. HAS AN INTRODUCTORY ACCOUNT OF THE INMATES OF THE HOUSE, TO WHICH OLIVER RESORTED 171
30. RELATES WHAT OLIVER'S NEW VISITORS THOUGHT OF HIM 174
31. INVOLVES A CRITICAL POSITION 179

32. OF THE HAPPY LIFE OLIVER BEGAN TO LEAD WITH HIS
KIND FRIENDS 187
33. WHEREIN THE HAPPINESS OF OLIVER AND HIS FRIENDS,
EXPERIENCES A SUDDEN CHECK 194
34. CONTAINS SOME INTRODUCTORY PARTICULARS RELATIVE TO A
YOUNG GENTLEMAN WHO NOW ARRIVES UPON THE SCENE;
AND A NEW ADVENTURE WHICH HAPPENED TO OLIVER 201
35. CONTAINING THE UNSATISFACTORY RESULT OF OLIVER'S
ADVENTURE; AND A CONVERSATION OF SOME IMPORTANCE
BETWEEN HARRY MAYLIE AND ROSE 208
36. IS A VERY SHORT ONE, AND MAY APPEAR OF NO GREAT
IMPORTANCE IN ITS PLACE, BUT IT SHOULD BE READ
NOTWITHSTANDING, AS A SEQUEL TO THE LAST,
AND A KEY TO ONE THAT WILL FOLLOW WHEN
ITS TIME ARRIVES 214
37. IN WHICH THE READER MAY PERCEIVE A CONTRAST, NOT
UNCOMMON IN MATRIMONIAL CASES 216
38. CONTAINING AN ACCOUNT OF WHAT PASSED BETWEEN MR. AND
MRS. BUMBLE, AND MR. MONKS, AT THEIR NOCTURNAL
INTERVIEW 224
39. INTRODUCES SOME RESPECTABLE CHARACTERS WITH WHOM
THE READER IS ALREADY ACQUAINTED, AND SHOWS HOW
MONKS AND THE JEW LAID THEIR WORTHY HEADS
TOGETHER 232
40. A STRANGE INTERVIEW, WHICH IS A SEQUEL TO THE LAST
CHAPTER 243
41. CONTAINING FRESH DISCOVERIES, AND SHOWING THAT
SURPRISES, LIKE MISFORTUNES, SELDOM COME
ALONE 248
42. AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE OF OLIVER'S, EXHIBITING DECIDED
MARKS OF GENIUS, BECOMES A PUBLIC CHARACTER IN
THE METROPOLIS 256
43. WHEREIN IS SHOWN HOW THE ARTFUL DODGER GOT INTO
TROUBLE 264
44. THE TIME ARRIVES FOR NANCY TO REDEEM HER PLEDGE TO
ROSE MAYLIE. SHE FAILS 272
45. NOAH CLAYPOLE IS EMPLOYED BY FAGIN ON A SECRET
MISSION 277

46. THE APPOINTMENT KEPT 280
47. FATAL CONSEQUENCES 287
48. THE FLIGHT OF SIKES 292
49. MONKS AND MR. BROWNLOW AT LENGTH MEET. THEIR
CONVERSATION, AND THE INTELLIGENCE THAT
INTERRUPTS IT 299
50. THE PURSUIT AND ESCAPE 307
51. AFFORDING AN EXPLANATION OF MORE MYSTERIES THAN ONE,
AND COMPREHENDING A PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE WITH NO
WORD OF SETTLEMENT OR PIN-MONEY 316
52. FAGIN'S LAST NIGHT ALIVE 326
53. AND LAST 332

1. *Treats of the Place Where Oliver Twist Was Born, and of the Circumstances Attending His Birth*

Among other public buildings in a certain town, which for many reasons it will be prudent to refrain from mentioning, and to which I will assign no fictitious name, there is one anciently common to most towns, great or small: to wit, a workhouse; and in this workhouse was born; on a day and date which I need not trouble myself to repeat, inasmuch as it can be of no possible consequence to the reader, in this stage of the business at all events; the item of mortality whose name is prefixed to the head of this chapter.

For a long time after it was ushered into this world of sorrow and trouble, by the parish surgeon, it remained a matter of considerable doubt whether the child would survive to bear any name at all; in which case it is somewhat more than probable that these memoirs would never have appeared; or, if they had, that being comprised within a couple of pages, they would have possessed the inestimable merit of being the most concise and faithful specimen of biography, extant in the literature of any age or country.

Although I am not disposed to maintain that the being born in a workhouse, is in itself the most fortunate and enviable circumstance that can possibly befall a human being, I do mean to say that in this particular instance, it was the best thing for Oliver Twist that could by possibility have occurred. The fact is, that there was considerable difficulty in inducing Oliver to take upon himself the office of respiration,—a troublesome practice, but one which custom has rendered necessary to our easy existence; and for some time he lay gasping on a little flock mattress, rather unequally poised between this world and the next: the balance being decidedly in favour of the latter. Now, if, during this brief period, Oliver had been surrounded by careful grandmothers, anxious aunts, experienced nurses, and doctors of profound wisdom, he would most inevitably and indubitably have been killed in no time. There being nobody by, however, but a pauper old woman, who was rendered rather misty by an unwonted allowance of beer; and a parish surgeon who did such matters by contract; Oliver and Nature fought out the point between them. The result was, that, after a few struggles, Oliver breathed, sneezed, and proceeded to advertise to the inmates of the workhouse the fact of a new burden having been imposed upon the parish, by setting up as loud a cry as could reasonably have been expected from a male infant who had not been possessed of that very useful appendage, a

voice, for a much longer space of time than three minutes, and a quarter.

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

The surgeon had been sitting with his face turned towards the fire: giving the palms of his hands a warm and a rub alternately. As the young woman spoke, he rose, and advancing to the bed's head, said, with more kindness than might have been expected of him:

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

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

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

The surgeon deposited it in her arms. She imprinted her cold white lips passionately on its forehead; passed her hands over her face; gazed wildly round; shuddered; fell back—and died. They chafed her breast, hands, and temples; but the blood had stopped for ever. They talked of hope and comfort. They had been strangers too long.

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

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

"You needn't mind sending up to me, if the child cries, nurse," said the surgeon, putting on his gloves with great deliberation. "It's very likely it *will* be troublesome. Give it a little gruel if it is." He put on his hat, and, pausing by the bed-side on his way to the door, added, "She was a good-looking girl, too; where did she come from?"

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

The surgeon 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, having once more applied herself to the green bottle, 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 which had hitherto formed his only covering, he might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar; it would have been hard for the haughtiest stranger to have assigned him his proper station in society. But now that he was enveloped in the old calico robes which had grown yellow in the same service, he was badged and ticketed, and fell into his place at once—a parish child—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.

2. Treats of Oliver Twist's Growth, Education, and Board

For the next eight or ten months, Oliver was the victim of a systematic course of treachery and deception. He was brought up by hand. The hungry and destitute situation of the infant orphan was duly reported by the workhouse authorities to the parish authorities. The parish authorities inquired with dignity of the workhouse authorities, whether there was no female then domiciled in "the house" who was in a situation to impart to Oliver Twist, the consolation and nourishment of which he stood in need. The workhouse authorities replied with humility, that there was not. Upon this, the parish authorities magnanimously and humanely resolved, that Oliver should be "farmed, or, in other words, that he should be despatched to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor-laws, rolled about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing, under the parental superintendence of an elderly female, who received the culprits at and for the consideration of sevenpence-halfpenny per small head per week. Sevenpence-halfpenny's worth per week is a good round diet for a child; a great deal may be got for sevenpence-halfpenny, quite enough to overload its stomach, and make it uncomfortable. The elderly female was a woman of wisdom and experience; she knew what was good for children; and she had a very accurate perception of what was good for herself. So, she appropriated the greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to even a shorter allowance than was originally provided for them. Thereby find-

ing in the lowest depth a deeper still; and proving herself a very great experimental philosopher.

Everybody knows the story of another experimental philosopher who had a great theory about a horse being able to live without eating, and who demonstrated it so well, that he had got his own horse down to a straw a day, and would unquestionably have rendered him a very spirited and rampacious animal on nothing at all, if he had not died, four-and-twenty hours before he was to have had his first comfortable bait of air. Unfortunately for the experimental philosophy of the female to whose protecting care Oliver Twist was delivered over, a similar result usually attended the operation of *her* system; for at the very moment when a child had contrived to exist upon the smallest possible portion of the weakest possible food, it did perversely happen in eight and a half cases out of ten, either that it sickened from want and cold, or fell into the fire from neglect, or got half-smothered by accident; in any one of which cases, the miserable little being was usually summoned into another world, and there gathered to the fathers it had never known in this.

Occasionally, when there was some more than usually interesting inquest upon a parish child who had been overlooked in turning up a bedstead, or inadvertently scalded to death when there happened to be a washing—though the latter accident was very scarce, anything approaching to a washing being of rare occurrence in the farm—the jury would take it into their heads to ask troublesome questions, or the parishioners would rebelliously affix their signatures to a remonstrance. But these impertinences were speedily checked by the evidence of the surgeon, and the testimony of the beadle; the former of whom had always opened the body and found nothing inside (which was very probable indeed), and the latter of whom invariably swore whatever the parish wanted; which was very self-devotional. Besides, the board made periodical pilgrimages to the farm, and always sent the beadle the day before, to say they were going. The children were neat and clean to behold, when *they* went; and what more would the people have!

It cannot be expected that this system of farming would produce any very extraordinary or luxuriant crop. Oliver Twist's ninth birthday found him a pale thin child, somewhat diminutive in stature, and decidedly small in circumference. But nature or inheritance had implanted a good sturdy spirit in Oliver's breast. It had had plenty of room to expand, thanks to the spare diet of the establishment; and perhaps to this circumstance may be attributed his having any ninth birthday at all. Be this as it may, however, it *was* his ninth birthday; and he was keeping it in the coal-cellar with a select party of two other young gentlemen, who, after participating with him in a sound thrashing, had been locked up for atrociously presuming to be hungry, when Mrs. Mann, the good lady of the house, was

unexpectedly startled by the apparition of Mr. Bumble, the beadle, striving to undo the wicket of the garden-gate.

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

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

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

Although this invitation was accompanied with a curtsy that might have softened the heart of a church-warden, it by no means mollified the beadle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I think you will," said Mrs. Mann, who had noticed the tone of the refusal, and the gesture that had accompanied it. "Just a leetle drop, with a little cold water, and a lump of sugar."

Mr. Bumble coughed.

"Now, just a leetle drop," said Mrs. Mann persuasively.

"What is it?" inquired the beadle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You, Mr. Bumble!"

"I, Mrs. Mann. We name our fondlings in alphabetical order. The last was a S,—Swubble, I named him. This was a T,—Twist, I named *him*. The next one as comes will be Unwin, and the next Vilkins. I have got names ready made to the end of the alphabet, and all the way through it again, when we come to Z."

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

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

him back into the house. I have come out myself to take him there. So let me see him at once."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This was no very great consolation to the child. Young as he was, however, he had sense enough to make a feint of feeling great regret at going away. It was no very difficult matter for the boy to call tears into his eyes. Hunger and recent ill-usage are great assistants if you want to cry; and Oliver cried very naturally indeed. Mrs. Mann gave him a thousand embraces, and, what Oliver wanted a great deal more, a piece of bread and butter, lest he should seem too hungry when he got to the workhouse. With the slice of bread in his hand, and the little brown-cloth parish cap on his head, Oliver was then led away by Mr. Bumble from the wretched home where one kind word or look had never lighted the gloom of his infant years. And yet he burst into an agony of childish grief, as the cottage-gate closed after him. Wretched as were the little companions in misery he was leaving behind, they were the only friends he had ever known; and a sense of his loneliness in the great wide world, sank into the child's heart for the first time.

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

Oliver had not been within the walls of the workhouse a quarter of an hour, and had scarcely completed the demolition of a second slice of bread, when Mr. Bumble, who had handed him over to the care of an old woman, returned; and, telling