

## **Oliver Twist - Level 6 - 26,602 words**

### CHAPTER ONE

#### Oliver's early life

Oliver Twist was born in a workhouse, and when he arrived in this hard world, it was very doubtful whether he would live beyond the first three minutes. He lay on a hard little bed and struggled to start breathing.

Oliver fought his first battle without much assistance from the two people present at his birth. One was an old woman, who was nearly always drunk, and the other was a busy local doctor, who was not paid enough to be very interested in Oliver's survival. After all, death was a common event in the workhouse, where only the poor and homeless lived.

However, Oliver managed to draw his first breath, and then announced his arrival to the rest of the workhouse by crying loudly. His mother raised her pale young face from the pillow and whispered, 'Let me see the child, and die.'

The doctor turned away from the fire, where he had been warming his hands. 'You must not talk about dying yet,' he said to her kindly. He gave her the child to hold.

Lovingly, she kissed the baby on its forehead with her cold white lips, then stared wildly around the room, fell back - and died.

'Poor dear!' said the nurse, hurriedly putting a green glass bottle back in the pocket of her long skirt.

The doctor began to put on his coat. 'The baby is weak and will probably have difficulties,' he said. 'If so, give it a little milk to keep it quiet.' Then he looked at the dead woman. 'The mother was a good-looking girl. 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 some distance, judging by her shoes, which were worn to pieces. Where she came from, where she was going to, or what her name was, nobody knows.'

The doctor lifted the girl's left hand. 'The old story,' he said sadly, shaking his head. 'No wedding ring, I see. Ah! Good night.'

And so Oliver was left with only the drunken nurse. Without clothes, under his first blanket, he could have been the child of a king or a beggar. But when the woman dressed him later in rough cotton clothes, yellow with age, he looked exactly what he was - an orphan in a workhouse, ready for a life of misery, hunger, and neglect.

Oliver cried loudly. If he could have known that he was a workhouse orphan, perhaps he would have cried even more loudly.

There was no one to look after the baby in the workhouse, so Oliver was sent to a special 'baby farm' nearby. There, he and thirty other children rolled around the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing. Mrs Mann, the old woman who 'looked after' them, was very experienced. She knew what was good for children, and a full stomach was very dangerous to their health. She also knew what was

good for herself, so she kept for her own use the money that she was given for the children's food. The board responsible for the orphans sometimes checked on the health of the children, but they always sent the beadle, a kind of local policeman, to announce their visit the day before. So whenever the board arrived, of course, the children were always neat and clean.

This was the way Oliver was brought up. Consequently, at the age of nine he was a pale, thin child and short for his age. But despite frequent beatings by Mrs Mann, his spirit was strong, which was probably the reason why he managed to reach the age of nine at all.

On Oliver's ninth birthday, Mr Bumble the beadle came to the house to see Mrs Mann. Through the front window Mrs Mann saw him at the gate, and turned quickly to the girl who worked with her.

Quick! Take Oliver and those others upstairs to be washed!' she said. Then she ran out to unlock the gate. (It was always kept locked to prevent official visitors walking in unexpectedly.)

'I have business to talk about,' Mr Bumble told Mrs Mann as he entered the house. He was a big fat man, often bad-tempered, and was full of self-importance. He did not like to be kept waiting at a locked gate.

Mrs Mann took his hat and coat, placed a chair for him, and expressed great concern for his comfort. 'You've had a long walk, Mr Bumble,' she said, 'and you must be thirsty.' She took out a bottle from the cupboard.

'No, thank you, Mrs Mann. Not a drop.' He waved the bottle away.

'Just little drop, Mr Bumble, with cold water,' said Mrs Mann persuasively.

Mr Bumble coughed. 'What is it?' he asked, looking at the bottle with interest.

'Gin. I keep it for the children's medicine drink.'

'You give the children gin, Mrs Mann?' asked Mr Bumble, watching as she mixed his drink.

'Only with medicine, sir. I don't like to see them suffer.'

'You're a good woman, Mrs Mann.' Mr Bumble drank half his glass immediately. 'I'll tell the board about you. Now - the reason why I'm here. Oliver Twist is nine years old today. We've never been able to discover anything about his parents.'

'Then how did he get his name?'

'I gave it to him,' said Mr Bumble proudly. 'We follow the alphabet. The last one was an S - Swubble. Then it was T, so this one is Twist. The next one will be Unwin. Anyway, Oliver Twist is now old enough to return to the workhouse. Bring him here, please.' While Mrs Mann went to get him, Mr Bumble finished the rest of his gin. Oliver, his face and hands now almost clean, was led into the room.

'Will you come along with me, Oliver?' asked Mr Bumble in a loud voice.

Oliver was very glad to be free of Mrs Mann's violence, but he said nothing because she was angrily shaking her finger at him. However, as the gate closed behind Oliver, he burst into tears. He was leaving behind the other

children, the only friends he had, and he realized at that moment how lonely he was in the world.

Mr Bumble walked on with long steps, with Oliver on his short little legs running beside him. The feeling of contentment produced by gin-and-water had now disappeared, and the beadle was in a bad mood once more.

Back at the workhouse, Oliver was taken to see the board. He stood in front of ten fat men who were sitting around a table.

'What's your name, boy?' asked a particularly fat man with a very round, red face.

Oliver was frightened at the sight of so many people, and started to cry.

'Why are you crying?'

The beadle hit him on the back, and so naturally Oliver cried even more.

'The boy is a fool,' one member of the board announced.

'You know you have no father or mother,' said the first man, 'and that you have been brought up with other orphans?'

'Yes, sir,' replied Oliver, crying bitterly.

'Why is the boy crying?' repeated the other man, puzzled.

'You have come here to be educated,' continued the fat man, 'so you will start working here tomorrow' at six o'clock.'

Oliver was led away to a large room, where, on a rough hard bed, he cried himself to sleep.

The room in the workhouse where the boys were fed was a large stone hall, and at one end the master and two women served the food. This consisted of a bowl of thin soup three times a day, with a piece of bread on Sundays. The boys ate everything and were always hungry. The bowls never needed washing. The boys polished them with their spoons until they shone. After three months of this slow starvation, one of the boys told the others he was so hungry that one night he might eat the boy who

slept next to him. He had a wild hungry eye, and the other boys believed him. After a long discussion, they decided that one of them should ask for more food after supper that evening, and Oliver was chosen.

The evening arrived; the soup was served, and the bowls were empty again in a few seconds. Oliver went up to the master, with his bowl in his hand. He felt very frightened, but also desperate with hunger.

'Please, sir, I want some more.'

The master was a fat, healthy man, but he turned very pale. He looked at the little boy in front of him with amazement. Nobody else spoke.

'What?' he asked at last, in a faint voice.

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

The master hit him with the serving spoon, then seized Oliver's arms and shouted for the beadle. The beadle came quickly, heard the dreadful news, and immediately ran to tell the board.

'He asked for more?' Mr Limbkins, the fattest board member, asked in horror. 'Bumble - is this really true?'

'That boy will be hanged!' said the man who earlier had called Oliver a fool. 'You see if I'm not right.'

Oliver was led away to be locked up, and a reward was offered to anybody who would take him away and use him for work.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Oliver's first job

Oliver stayed a prisoner alone in the dark room for a week. He cried bitterly all day, and when the long night came, he spread his little hands over his eyes to shut out the darkness, and tried to sleep. He was given freezing water to wash with, and was beaten daily by Mr Bumble in front of all the other boys in the hall, as a warning to them.

One day Mr Bumble met the local undertaker, Mr Sowerberry, outside the workhouse.

'Do you know anybody who wants to train a boy for work, Mr Sowerberry?' Mr Bumble pointed at the notice

on the wall above him, which offered five pounds to anybody who would take Oliver Twist for work.

Mr Sowerberry rubbed his chin and thought for a while. 'I pay enough for the poor with my taxes,' he said, 'so why shouldn't I be able to make use of them in my work? Yes, I'll take the boy myself.'

And so the board agreed to send Oliver to work for the undertaker. The necessary papers were signed. Oliver's small possessions were put into a brown paper parcel, and he was led to Mr Sowerberry's house by Mr Rumble. As they walked along, tears began to run down Oliver's face.

'What is it this time?' asked Mr Bumble impatiently.

'Don't be so ungrateful. This gentleman is going to look after you.'

'It's just that I'm so lonely, sir!' said the child. 'Everybody hates me. Please don't be angry with me, sir!'

Even Mr Bumble felt a little pity. He coughed, told Oliver to dry his eyes and be a good boy, and walked on with him in silence.

The undertaker had just finished work for the day when Mr Bumble entered his shop.

'Here, I've brought the boy,' said the beadle.

Oliver bowed to the undertaker, who raised his candle to get a better view of the boy. 'Mrs Sowerberry,' he called, 'come and have a look.'

His wife, a short, thin woman with a disagreeable face, came out to see. 'He's very small,' she said immediately.

'He is,' agreed Mr Bumble, 'but he'll grow, Mrs Sowerberry.'

'Yes,' she said crossly, 'when he eats our food. Go on, get downstairs.' She pushed Oliver downstairs into a damp, dark kitchen, and called to the girl working down there.

'Here, Charlotte, give this boy some meat that the dog left - if he thinks it's good enough for him.'

Oliver tore the meat to pieces with his teeth as if he were a wild animal. Mrs Sowerberry watched him in silent horror, already thinking about her future food bills, then took him upstairs to the shop.

'You'll sleep here, among the coffins,' she said.

Oliver stared around the dark, airless shop at the coffins, some finished, some only half-made. He trembled at the thought of ghosts. His bed was a small hole in the floor, and looked very like a grave.

But it was not only the room that depressed Oliver. He felt very lonely, with no friends and no one to care for him. As he lay on the bed, he found himself wishing that it really was his grave.

The next morning he was woken up by someone kicking at the shop door.

'Open the door, will you?' shouted a voice through the keyhole. 'Yes, sir.'

'I suppose you're the new boy,' said the voice through the keyhole. 'How old are you?'

'Ten, sir.'

'Then I'll hit you when I get in,' said the voice.

Oliver was experienced enough to know that the promise was probably true. He opened the door with a shaking hand, then looked up and down the street. All he could see was a large boy wearing the uniform of one of the

charity schools, where the children of the very poor used to go.

'Did you want a coffin?' asked Oliver, innocently.

The charity-boy looked at him fiercely. 'You'll be needing a coffin soon, Workhouse, if you make jokes like that!

I'm Mister Noah Claypole, and you're working under me.

Now, hurry up and open the curtains!' As he said this, he

kicked Oliver and entered the shop. He was a big, clumsy boy of about fourteen, with a large head and very small eyes. Added to these attractions were a red nose and dirty yellow trousers.

The boys went down to breakfast, which the girl

Charlotte had made for them. She gave an extra piece of meat to Noah, then told Oliver to hurry up as it was his job to look after the shop.

'Did you hear that, Workhouse?' shouted Noah.

'He heard, Noah,' said Charlotte. 'Leave him alone.'

'Why?' asked Noah. 'All his relations have already left him alone. His mother and father aren't going to interfere with him!' Charlotte and Noah both started laughing

loudly, Oliver sat alone in the corner, eating old bits of bread.

Noah was a charity-boy, but not a workhouse orphan; he at least knew who his parents were. But for a long time all the local shop-boys had insulted him because he wore the uniform of a charity-boy. Now fortune had brought him a creature in an even lower position in society than himself. Noah intended to repay to Oliver every insult he had ever received, and to make the new boy's life a misery.

After a few weeks, Mr Sowerberry decided that he liked Oliver's appearance enough to train him in the undertaking business. Oliver's permanent expression of sadness was very suitable, the undertaker thought, for collecting dead bodies from houses and accompanying the coffins to funerals.

One day Mr Bumble came to tell them about a woman who had died in an extremely poor part of the town, and Sowerberry and Oliver went to collect the body. They went down dusty narrow streets where the houses on either side were tall and large, but very old. Some of the

houses were almost falling down, and had to be supported by huge blocks of wood. The area was so poor that even the dead rats in the street looked as though they had died of hunger.

They found the right house, and climbed the dark stairs to a miserable little room. Some children watched them from the shadows as they entered. Something lay beneath a blanket on the floor in one corner. A man and an old woman stood near the body. Oliver was afraid to look at them. With their thin faces and sharp teeth, they looked like the rats he had seen outside.

As Sowerberry began to measure the body for a coffin, the man knelt on the floor and cried out, 'She starved to death, I tell you! That's why she died!' He fell to the floor, and all the children behind him started to cry. Sowerberry and Oliver, their work done, left as fast as they could.

They returned the next day with the coffin and four men from the workhouse who were to carry it. The man and the old woman followed the coffin to the church, and waited silently by the grave for the priest to arrive. When at last he came, he hurried through the burial prayers,

and as quickly as possible (it was only a job, after all) the coffin was put into the ground. At this point the husband, who had not moved once during his wife's burial - not even during the long wait for the priest - suddenly fainted to the ground and had to have cold water thrown over him.

'So how did you like it, Oliver?' asked Sowerberry later, as they walked home.

'Not very much, sir,' Oliver answered truthfully.

'You'll get used to it, my boy.'

Oliver wondered how long that would take, and remained silent all the way back to the shop, thinking about everything that he had seen and heard.