

# Oliver Twist

By Charles Dickens

## EPISODE ONE

- NARRATOR      Among other public buildings in a certain town, there is a workhouse...and in this workhouse was born the child whose name is fixed to the start of this story.
- For a long time it remained a matter of considerable doubt whether Oliver would survive to bear any name at all...there being nobody present by but an old woman, who was rendered rather misty by beer...and a Doctor. Oliver and Nature fought out the point between them. The result was, that, after a few struggles...Oliver breathed, sneezed...and set up a loud cry.
- As Oliver gave this first proof of the proper action of his lungs the patchwork cover which was carelessly flung over the bed rustled, and the pale face of a young woman rose feebly from the pillow...
- MOTHER      Let me see the child...and die.
- NURSE      Lor' bless her!
- MOTHER      My child...
- NARRATOR      So saying and pressing her cold white lips passionately on its forehead, the young woman fell back - and died.
- DOCTOR      It's all over, Mrs Thingummy!
- NURSE      Poor dear!
- DOCTOR      She was a good-looking young woman; where did she come from?
- NURSE      She was brought here last night...was found lying in the street...walked some distance, for her shoes were worn to pieces...but where she come from, or where she was going to, nobody knows.
- DOCTOR      The old story - no wedding-ring, I see. Good-night!

NARRATOR If Oliver could have known that he was the orphan of a workhouse, to be cuffed and buffeted through the world, despised by all and pitied by none, perhaps he would have cried all the louder.

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NARRATOR Oliver was dispatched to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty other juveniles rolled about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing, under the parental superintendence of an elderly woman.

MRS MANN Susan! Thrash 'em and throw 'em in the cellar!

NARRATOR It happened in eight and a half cases out of ten either that a child sickened from want and cold, or fell into the fire from neglect or accident. But nature, or inheritance, had implanted a good sturdy spirit in Oliver.

MRS MANN In the cellar with you, boy!

NARRATOR He was keeping it in the coal-cellar with a select party of two other young gentleman, who, after participating with him in a sound thrashing, had been locked up for presuming to be hungry - when Mrs Mann, the good lady of the house, was unexpectedly startled by Mr Bumble, striving to undo the garden-gate.

MRS MANN Goodness gracious! Is that you, Mr Bumble, sir? 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!

BUMBLE Mrs Mann!

NARRATOR Mr Bumble officiously deposits his hat and cane on the table before him...

MRS MANN Now, will you take a little drop of somethink, Mr Bumble? You've had a long walk.

BUMBLE What is it?

MRS MANN Why, it's what I'm obliged to keep a little of in the house, to put into the children's tonic, when they ain't well, Mr Bumble.

BUMBLE You feel as a mother, Mrs Mann. I drink your health with cheerfulness.

MRS MANN Oh Lor' what a thirst!

- BUMBLE                    The child that was half baptized Oliver Twist, is nine year old today.
- MRS MANN                Lor' bless him! But how comes he to have any name at all, then?
- BUMBLE                    I inwented it.
- MRS MANN                You, Mr Bumble!
- 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. I have got names ready to the end of the alphabet all the way through to Z!
- MRS MANN                Why, you're quite a literary character, sir!
- BUMBLE                    Well, well, perhaps I may be. Perhaps I may be, Mrs Mann. Now, Oliver being too old to remain here, the workhouse board have determined to have him back. I have come out myself to take him there. So let me see him at once.
- MRS MANN                Susan! Bring the boy.
- NARRATOR                Oliver was pushed into the room.
- MRS MANN                Make a bow to the gentleman, Oliver.
- OLIVER                    Sir.
- BUMBLE                    Will you go along with me, Oliver?
- OLIVER                    Will she go with me?
- BUMBLE                    No, she can't. But she'll come and see you sometimes.
- NARRATOR                Which was very great consolation to the child.

And so Oliver went back to the workhouse where he was born; and where the workhouse Board now decided that he be educated, and taught the useful trade of picking apart old rope for oakum - to start that very next morning, at six o'clock.

Though no kind word or look had ever lighted the gloom of his infant years, yet Oliver had burst into an agony of childish grief, as the cottage-gate closed after him, as he lay on the rough, hard bed in the large ward of the workhouse, sobbing himself to sleep.

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NARRATOR

The room in which the boys were fed was a large stone hall, with a large copper pot at one end: out of which the master, ladled the gruel at mealtimes. The bowls never wanted washing. The boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again and then they would suck their fingers with the view of catching up any stray splashes of gruel that might have been cast thereon.

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

The evening arrived. The boys take their places. The master is stationed at the pot. The gruel is served out. The gruel is eaten. The boys whisper and nudge Oliver. Desperate with hunger and reckless with misery, Oliver approaches the master, basin and spoon in hand...

OLIVER

Please, sir, I want some more.

MASTER

What!

OLIVER

Please, sir, I want some more.

MASTER

Fetch Mr Bumble! Fetch Mr Bumble!

NARRATOR

As the master beats the boy with his ladle, Mr Bumble, rushes in horror to the workhouse Board. The boy Oliver Twist has asked for more! Throw him in the cellar. Throw away the key!

While Oliver sits in the dark, a bill is pasted on the outside of the workhouse gate, offering a reward of five pounds to anyone who will take Oliver Twist off the hands of the parish. In other words, five pounds and Oliver Twist will be offered to any man or woman who wants an apprentice to any trade, business, or calling.

Meanwhile Oliver remains a prisoner in the dark and solitary room where he cries bitterly all day; and from where he is carried every other day into the hall where the boys dine, and there flogged as a public warning and example.

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NARRATOR

The first person to read the notice on the gate is Mr Gamfield, the chimney-sweeper.

GAMFIELD

Five pounds and a boy. One as could climb up the chimbleys and not get stuck.

- NARRATOR Mr Gamfield is taken before the workhouse Board.
- GAMFIELD It's a light and pleasant trade. And though they may get stuck, for boys is wery obstinit, and wery lazy, Gen'l'men, I find there's nothink like a good hot blaze to make 'em come down vith a run. It's humane too, gen'l'men, acause, even if they've stuck in the chimbley, roasting their feet makes 'em struggle to hextricate theirselves before they've got themselves smothered.
- NARRATOR No, not Mr Gamfield. Could the board send him to sea, where in all probability the skipper would flog him to death in a playful mood, some day after dinner? Or perhaps Mr Sowerberry, the local undertaker?
- Mr Sowerberry was a tall, large-jointed man, dressed in a suit of threadbare black, with darned cotton socks of the same colour, and shoes to match.
- BUMBLE I've brought the boy, Mr Sowerberry. Now make a bow, boy.
- OLIVER Sir.
- SOWERB Oh! Mr Bumble...why, he's very small.
- BUMBLE Why, he is rather small. There's no denying it. But he'll grow, Mr Sowerberry, he'll grow!
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- NARRATOR Night. Oliver is in his bed beneath the counter, sleeping among the coffins. An unfinished coffin is standing on black tressels in the middle of the shop. A cold tremble comes over Oliver every time his eyes wander in its direction. He almost expects to see some frightful form slowly rear its head from it, to drive him mad with terror...
- Then the next morning...
- NOAH Open the door, will yer?
- OLIVER I will, directly, sir.
- NOAH I suppose yer the new boy, ain't yer?
- OLIVER Yes, sir.
- NOAH How old are yer?

- OLIVER I'm ten now, sir.
- NOAH Then I'll whop yer when I get in; you just see if I don't, that's all, my work'us brat! Yer don't know who I am, I suppose, Work'us? I'm Mister Noah Claypole, and you're under me. Take down the shutters, yer idle young ruffian!
- NARRATOR But Oliver, noted by Mr Sowerberry, for his expression of melancholy, was soon promoted over the large-headed, Mr Noah Claypole. And, it being a nice sickly season in which measles were prevalent, many were the mournful processions which little Oliver headed, in a hat-band reaching down to his knees, to the admiration of all the mothers in the town; and to the envy of Noah.
- NOAH Yer little sneak.
- NARRATOR Noah was pulling Oliver's hair and twitching his ears, as was his usual custom. But, not making Oliver cry, Noah did what many sometimes do to this day when they want to be funny. He got rather personal.
- NOAH Work'us, how's your mother?
- OLIVER She's dead; don't you say anything about her to me!
- NOAH What did she die of, Work'us?
- OLIVER Of a broken heart, they told me. I think I know what it must be to die of that! Don't you say anything more about her; you'd better not!
- NOAH Better not! Better not! Well! But yer must know, Work'us, yer mother was a regular right-down bad 'un.
- OLIVER What did you say?
- NOAH And it's a great deal better, Work'us, that she died when she did, or else she'd have been hard labouring, or transported...or hung; which is more likely than either, isn't it?
- NARRATOR Crimson with fury, Oliver fells Noah to the ground. For which he is locked in the cellar by Mrs Sowerberry...
- Mr Sowerberry returns at last and at once gives Oliver a drubbing...
- With the first ray of light Oliver rises and unbars the door. One moment of hesitation - and he has closed the door behind him and is in the open street...

After nearly five miles of running and hiding under hedges, Oliver sits down to rest by the side of a milestone. The stone bears, in large letters, an intimation that it is just seventy miles from that spot to London. London! That great place! Nobody could ever find him there! Jumping upon his feet, he walks quickly on.