

CHARLES DICKENS

OLIVER TWIST

Bird Publisher, 2011

About this eBook

Oliver Twist
Charles Dickens

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Table of Content

CHAPTER I:	TREATS OF THE PLACE WHERE OLIVER TWIST WAS BORN AND OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES ATTENDING HIS BIRTH	6
CHAPTER II:	TREATS OF OLIVER TWIST'S GROWTH, EDUCATION, AND BOARD	8
CHAPTER III:	RELATES HOW OLIVER TWIST WAS VERY NEAR GETTING A PLACE WHICH WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN A SINECURE	15
CHAPTER IV:	OLIVER, BEING OFFERED ANOTHER PLACE, MAKES HIS FIRST ENTRY INTO PUBLIC LIFE	21
CHAPTER V:	OLIVER MINGLES WITH NEW ASSOCIATES. GOING TO A FUNERAL FOR THE FIRST TIME, HE FORMS AN UNFAVOURABLE NOTION OF HIS MASTER'S BUSINESS	26
CHAPTER VI:	OLIVER, BEING GOADED BY THE TAUNTS OF NOAH, ROUSES INTO ACTION, AND RATHER ASTONISHES HIM	33
CHAPTER VII:	OLIVER CONTINUES REFRACTORY	37
CHAPTER VIII:	OLIVER WALKS TO LONDON. HE ENCOUNTERS ON THE ROAD A STRANGE SORT OF YOUNG GENTLEMAN	42
CHAPTER IX:	CONTAINING FURTHER PARTICULARS CONCERNING THE PLEASANT OLD GENTLEMAN, AND HIS HOPEFUL PUPILS.....	48
CHAPTER X:	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	53
CHAPTER XI:	TREATS OF MR. FANG THE POLICE MAGISTRATE; AND FURNISHES A SLIGHT SPECIMEN OF HIS MODE OF ADMINISTERING JUSTICE.....	57
CHAPTER XII:	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
CHAPTER XIII:	SOME NEW ACQUAINTANCES ARE INTRODUCED TO THE INTELLIGENT READER, CONNECTED WITH WHOM VARIOUS PLEASANT MATTERS ARE RELATED, APPERTAINING TO THIS HISTORY	68

CHAPTER XIV:	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.....	74
CHAPTER XV:	SHOWING HOW VERY FOND OF OLIVER TWIST, THE MERRY OLD JEW AND MISS NANCY WERE.....	81
CHAPTER XVI:	RELATES WHAT BECAME OF OLIVER TWIST, AFTER HE HAD BEEN CLAIMED BY NANCY	86
CHAPTER XVII:	OLIVER'S DESTINY CONTINUING UNPROFITIOUS, BRINGS A GREAT MAN TO LONDON TO INJURE HIS REPUTATION	93
CHAPTER XVIII:	HOW OLIVER PASSED HIS TIME IN THE IMPROVING SOCIETY OF HIS REPUTABLE FRIENDS	100
CHAPTER XIX:	IN WHICH A NOTABLE PLAN IS DISCUSSED AND DETERMINED ON	105
CHAPTER XX:	WHEREIN OLIVER IS DELIVERED OVER TO MR. WILLIAM SIKES	112
CHAPTER XXI:	THE EXPEDITION	118
CHAPTER XXII:	THE BURGLARY	122
CHAPTER XXIII:	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	127
CHAPTER XXIV:	TREATS ON A VERY POOR SUBJECT. BUT IS A SHORT ONE, AND MAY BE FOUND OF IMPORTANCE IN THIS HISTORY	132
CHAPTER XXV:	WHEREIN THIS HISTORY REVERTS TO MR. FAGIN AND COMPANY	136
CHAPTER XXVI:	IN WHICH A MYSTERIOUS CHARACTER APPEARS UPON THE SCENE; AND MANY THINGS, INSEPARABLE FROM THIS HISTORY, ARE DONE AND PERFORMED	141
CHAPTER XXVII:	ATONES FOR THE UNPOLITENESS OF A FORMER CHAPTER; WHICH DESERTED A LADY, MOST UNCEREMONIOUSLY	149
CHAPTER XXVIII:	LOOKS AFTER OLIVER, AND PROCEEDS WITH HIS ADVENTURES	154
CHAPTER XXIX :	HAS AN INTRODUCTORY ACCOUNT OF THE INMATES OF THE HOUSE, TO WHICH OLIVER RESORTED	160
CHAPTER XXX:	RELATES WHAT OLIVER'S NEW VISITORS THOUGHT OF HIM	163
CHAPTER XXXI:	INVOLVES A CRITICAL POSITION	168

CHAPTER XXXII:	OF THE HAPPY LIFE OLIVER BEGAN TO LEAD WITH HIS KIND FRIENDS	175
CHAPTER XXXIII:	WHEREIN THE HAPPINESS OF OLIVER AND HIS FRIENDS, EXPERIENCES A SUDDEN CHECK	181
CHAPTER XXXIV:	CONTAINS SOME INTRODUCTORY PARTICULARS RELATIVE TO A YOUNG GENTLEMAN WHO NOW ARRIVES UPON THE SCENE; AND A NEW ADVENTURE WHICH HAPPENED TO OLIVER	187
CHAPTER XXXV:	CONTAINING THE UNSATISFACTORY RESULT OF OLIVER'S ADVENTURE; AND A CONVERSATION OF SOME IMPORTANCE BETWEEN HARRY MAYLIE AND ROSE	194
CHAPTER XXXVI:	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	199
CHAPTER XXXVII:	IN WHICH THE READER MAY PERCEIVE A CONTRAST, NOT UNCOMMON IN MATRIMONIAL CASES	201
CHAPTER XXXVIII:	CONTAINING AN ACCOUNT OF WHAT PASSED BETWEEN MR. AND MRS. BUMBLE, AND MR. MONKS, AT THEIR NOCTURNAL INTERVIEW	208
CHAPTER XXXIX:	INTRODUCES SOME RESPECTABLE CHARACTERS WITH WHOM THE READER IS ALREADY ACQUAINTED, AND SHOWS HOW MONKS AND THE JEW LAID THEIR WORTHY HEADS TOGETHER	215
CHAPTER XL:	A STRANGE INTERVIEW, WHICH IS A SEQUEL TO THE LAST CHAMBER	225
CHAPTER XLI:	CONTAINING FRESH DISCOVERIES, AND SHOWING THAT SUPRISES, LIKE MISFORTUNES, SELDOM COME ALONE	230
CHAPTER XLII:	AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE OF OLIVER'S, EXHIBITING DECIDED MARKS OF GENIUS, BECOMES A PUBLIC CHARACTER IN THE METROPOLIS	237
CHAPTER XLIII:	WHEREIN IS SHOWN HOW THE ARTFUL DODGER GOT INTO TROUBLE	244
CHAPTER XLIV:	THE TIME ARRIVES FOR NANCY TO REDEEM HER PLEDGE TO ROSE MAYLIE. SHE FAILS.	251
CHAPTER XLV:	NOAH CLAYPOLE IS EMPLOYED BY FAGIN ON A SECRET MISSION	256
CHAPTER XLVI:	THE APPOINTMENT KEPT	259
CHAPTER XLVII:	FATAL CONSEQUENCES	266

CHAPTER XLVIII:	THE FLIGHT OF SIKES	271
CHAPTER XLIX:	MONKS AND MR. BROWNLOW AT LENGTH MEET. THEIR CONVERSATION, AND THE INTELLIGENCE THAT INTERRUPTS IT	277
CHAPTER L:	THE PURSUIT AND ESCAPE	283
CHAPTER LI:	AFFORDING AN EXPLANATION OF MORE MYSTERIES THAN ONE, AND COMPREHENDING A PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE WITH NO WORD OF SETTLEMENT OR PIN-MONEY	291
CHAPTER LII:	FAGIN'S LAST NIGHT ALIVE	300
CHAPTER LIII:	AND LAST	306

CHAPTER I

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 forever. 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.

CHAPTER II

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 dispatched 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 finding 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 the 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 gentleman, 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. Nor 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 condition.“

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 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.