

Chapter One  
Treats of  
Oliver Twist's  
Birth and Board

Among the buildings in English Victorian towns there often stood a house for the poor, known as the workhouse. On the night this story begins, a young girl collapsed in the street and was carried into one. Her shoes were worn with walking and she was heavily pregnant. Where she came from, or where she was going to, nobody knew.

The next day, in the presence of a parish doctor and a drunken nurse, she gave birth to a baby boy named Oliver. For some time, he lay poised between life and death. Then, after a few struggles, he breathed, sneezed and let out a cry. As Oliver gave this first proof that he was alive, his pale-faced mother raised herself feebly from her pillow and whispered, "Let me see the child, and die."

Oliver's poor mother hardly had the



strength to hold him in her arms. She kissed Oliver once with her sweet, pale lips, closed her eyes and died.

Her family could not be traced, nor could Oliver's father. As Oliver lay wrapped in a blanket, it was impossible to tell if he was the child of an aristocrat or of a beggar. But now, as the drunken nurse dressed him in an old calico cloth, which had grown yellow with use, it was quite clear that he was nothing more than a workhouse orphan. Like all the other half-starved orphans, he would be despised by all and pitied by none. Oliver began to cry lustily. If he could have known that he was now an orphan, perhaps he would have cried even louder!

Oliver was given the surname "Twist"

by Mr Bumble, the parish beadle, and left in the care of an elderly woman. She was a cruel old lady and she fed the babies in her care on the smallest possible amount of weak gruel, leaving them rolling about on the floor. Those that did not die from starvation often sickened and died of neglect or even fell into the fire, but Oliver had a sturdy spirit and somehow he survived these years of neglect.

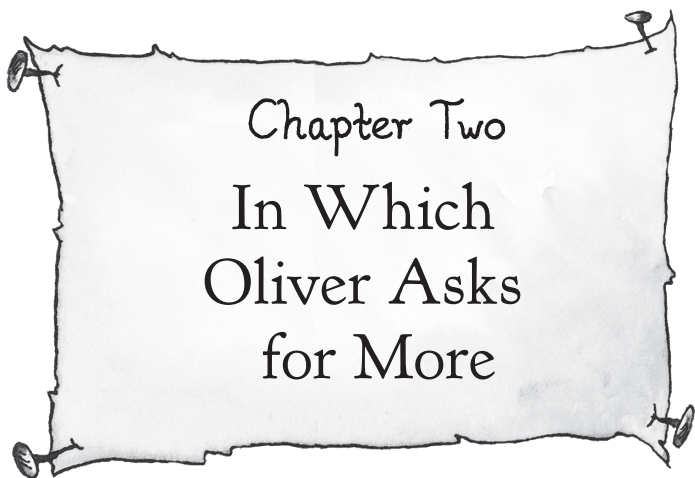
By the age of nine, Oliver looked younger than his years. He was short in stature and very pale and thin. However, Mr Bumble thought him ready to learn a trade and join the other workhouse children. These poor, ragged youngsters were fed on three meals of watery gruel a day, an onion twice a



week and half a roll on Sundays. They grew so hungry they began to worry they might eat each other!

One day, the boys held a meeting and lots were cast to choose who would dare go up and ask the master for more gruel after supper. The lot fell to Oliver.





Chapter Two  
In Which  
Oliver Asks  
for More

That evening, the boys took their places and the master served out the miserable helpings of gruel from the great copper pot. The ravenous youngsters quickly vanished the gruel down their throats, then winked at Oliver. Reckless with hunger, Oliver rose from the table. He held out his bowl to the master. "Please, sir, I want some more."

The well-fed master turned very pale.





Everyone was paralysed with fear.

“What!” whispered the master at last.

“Please, sir, I want some more.”

The master hit Oliver over the head with the ladle, grabbed him by the arms and shrieked for the beadle. Mr Bumble marched him straight off to the workhouse governors.

“That boy will come to be hung,” the governors cried in horror.

They ordered Mr Bumble to put a notice on the workhouse gate, offering a five-pound

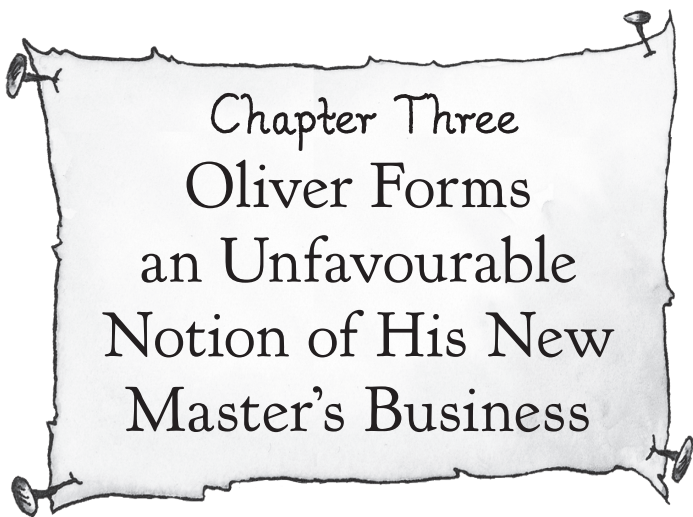


reward to any man or woman who would take Oliver Twist off the hands of the parish.

After that, Mr Bumble locked Oliver up in a cell. Every day, he came back and beat Oliver and Oliver cried bitter tears. Every night, the poor orphan shivered without a blanket, spread his little hands before his eyes to shut out the darkness, and tried to sleep. Many times during the long hours he would wake in fear and huddle closer to the wall, as if to find comfort from his loneliness in its cold, hard surface.

There he stayed for over a week.





Chapter Three  
Oliver Forms  
an Unfavourable  
Notion of His New  
Master's Business

After that awful week had passed and no employer had been found for Oliver, the governors decided to send him as a cabin-boy on some trading vessel bound for foreign parts. Either Oliver would die of some terrible disease or the skipper would flog him to death. The board felt that either of these ends would be no less than Oliver deserved.

On his way to find a captain in need of a friendless boy, Mr Bumble met Mr Sowerberry, the local undertaker. He was a tall, gaunt man in a black threadbare suit, with darned stockings to match. Business was good for Mr Sowerberry and he was in need of a new boy apprentice – in fact, just such a boy as Oliver. So it was agreed that Mr Sowerberry should take Oliver to be his assistant. The governors told Oliver that he must either go with the coffin-maker or be sent to sea.

Poor Oliver wept until the tears sprang out from between his bony fingers.

“I am a very little boy, Mr Beadle, sir,” said Oliver, “and it will be so lonely amongst the coffins.”



Mr Bumble regarded Oliver in astonishment, then took his hand and marched him straight to the undertaker's shop.

Mrs Sowerberry, the undertaker's wife, was a mean woman. She took one look at Oliver and said in disgust, "Dear me! He's very small."

For supper she gave Oliver the scraps she'd kept by for the dog. Then she told him to make his bed among the coffins. Oliver felt as if he were lying in a graveyard, and





every moment expected some terrible form to rise up and haunt him.

The next morning, Oliver met Mr Sowerberry's assistant, Noah Claypole. Noah was a large-headed, small-eyed bully, who grew fond of kicking Oliver, pulling his hair, twitching his ears and saying, "I'll whop yer, work'us brat." He felt himself very superior to Oliver.

Undertaking was a busy trade in those



days, as many people died of illness or starvation. Oliver quickly got used to measuring coffins, collecting bodies and going to funerals. Oliver attended more funerals than Noah on account of his melancholy expression, which Mr Sowerberry felt added dignity to the funeral procession. Noah grew jealous of Oliver and his taunts became more frequent.

One day, Noah went too far and insulted Oliver's dead mother. "She was a regular right-down bad 'un!" he crowed.

Meek, tiny Oliver turned into a crimson ball of fury. He attacked Noah with all the force he could muster and knocked him to the ground. Mrs Sowerberry rushed to

Noah's aid, and between them they pommelled and scratched Oliver until they were exhausted. When they were done, they dragged poor Oliver into the coal cellar and locked him up.

Noah ran to fetch Mr Bumble who was convinced that Mrs Sowerberry had been overfeeding Oliver. Both Mr Bumble and Mr Sowerberry beat Oliver so that



even Mrs Sowerberry was satisfied, but Oliver refused to cry.

Not until the night was dark, and Oliver was again alone among the coffins, did he fall to his knees and weep.

Early the next morning, before anyone else was awake, Oliver packed a small bundle, slipped out into the street and set off for London.

