

Oliver Twist

Charles Dickens

TIMELESS CLASSICS





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A Hungry Orphan

In a certain town, which I have no reason to name, there is a workhouse. There, the poor of the town toil without pay. On a date that does not matter, Oliver Twist was born in this sad place.

At first, there was some doubt that the baby would live. But after a few struggles, he breathed, sneezed, and let out a loud cry.

Hearing this, the young mother's pale face rose weakly from the pillow. "Let me see the child—and die," she whispered hoarsely.

The doctor frowned. "Come now, my girl. You must not talk about dying yet."

Sally, the woman who had been helping, quickly hid the bottle she had been drinking from in her pocket. Then she said, "Bless her heart, no!"

The doctor placed the child in his mother's arms. She put her cold white lips to his forehead, looked around wildly, fell back—and died.

Sally and the doctor rubbed her hands and chest, but the young woman's heart had stopped forever. "It's all over," said the doctor. "It's a shame. She was a good-looking girl. Where did she come from?"

"She was brought here last night. They said she was found lying in the street. Where she came from, nobody knows," Sally answered.

The doctor raised the dead woman's left hand. "Ah! No wedding ring, I see. The same old story. Well, goodnight."

Old Sally dressed the baby boy. What a wonderful example of the power of dress young Oliver was! Wrapped in a fine blanket, he might have been the child of a rich man. But now that he was dressed in old, worn-out baby clothes, he fell into his place at once. He was a *workhouse child*, doomed to be kicked along through the world, looked down on by all, and pitied by none.

The tiny boy was sent to a baby farm, run by a Mrs. Mann. A wise woman, indeed, was Mrs. Mann. She was very clear about what was good for children and what was good for herself. She kept most of the food money for herself, and fed the children barely enough to stay alive.

As you know, dear reader, this kind of farming does not produce much of a crop. Oliver's ninth birthday found him a pale, thin child. Unlike many of the children who had come to the baby farm, however, he was still alive.

It was on this day that the baby farm had a most important visitor. It was Mr. Bumble, the parish beadle. Mr. Bumble was a greedy, fat man and quite convinced of his own importance as a minor official at the village church.

"Oliver is too old to stay here any longer," Mr. Bumble told Mrs. Mann. "He must go to the workhouse now." In all the years Oliver had spent with Mrs. Mann, not one kind word or look had ever come his way. And yet he burst into tears when he was led away by Mr. Bumble. The farm was the only home he had ever known.

The workhouse was a fine home for poor people. It gave them a wonderful choice. They could choose to live there and starve slowly. Or they could choose *not* to live there and starve quickly. People who lived in the workhouse got a meal of gruel—watered-down oatmeal—three times a day. Twice a week they were given an onion, too. On Sundays they got half a roll.

Oliver and the other boys were wild with



hunger. One boy began hinting that he might eat one of the others if he didn't get more gruel in his bowl. The other boys believed him and quickly held a meeting. They played a game of chance to decide who would be the one to ask for more. The miserable job fell to Oliver Twist.

That evening he went up to the master, bowl in hand. "Please, sir," he said timidly, "I want some more." The master was a well-fed, healthy man, but now he turned pale. He stared at Oliver, his mouth hanging open in shock. Then he grabbed the boy and yelled for the beadle.

The members of the workhouse board were

having a meeting when Mr. Bumble burst in. “I beg your pardon, sirs!” he said. “Something outrageous has happened. Oliver Twist has asked for *more!*”

“For *more?*” snorted one. “That boy will be hanged some day,” he cried. “I know it.”

Oliver was shut up in a dark room for a week. Every other day he was brought to the dining hall. There, he was whipped as an example and a warning to the other boys. A notice was put up in front of the workhouse. It offered five pounds to any citizen who would take Oliver Twist.

In the end, Oliver was given to Mr. Sowerberry, the parish undertaker. Mr. Sowerberry was a tall, thin man, dressed all in black. He took Oliver home to Mrs. Sowerberry, a short, scrawny woman. She ordered the maid, Charlotte, to give the boy some meat the dog hadn’t eaten. That night Oliver had a restful sleep among the coffins and coffin-making supplies upstairs.

In the morning Oliver met Noah Claypole, who also worked for Mr. Sowerberry. Noah was a 10-year-old charity-boy, sent by his mother to a charity school and dressed in a charity uniform. He was used to being called *Charity* and looked down upon by other boys. But now Noah had

the luck to find Oliver—an orphan—whom even *he* could look down upon. Oh, what a beautiful thing human nature is! The same fine qualities can be found in both a great lord and a dirty charity-boy.

When Oliver had been at Mr. Sowerberry's a few weeks, the undertaker asked his wife a question. In a timid voice, he said, "I want to ask what you think, my dear. Young Twist is a very good-looking boy. There is a most interesting look of *sadness* about him. I think he could come to children's funerals. It might look nice, don't you think, dear?"

The next day Oliver went out to a funeral with Mr. Sowerberry. He didn't like it at all, but Mr. Sowerberry told him that, in time, he would get used to such sad affairs.