



PART I

CHAPTER I

Once a child was born in a workhouse. The mother, who was found lying on the street, died not long after that. No one knew her, where she was from and where she was going to. All she wanted was just to look at her baby:

"Let me see the child, and die," were her last words.

The baby was weak and it was a big question if the child would survive – so they didn't take the trouble to give it the name immediately, and the doctor asked not to bother him if it started crying:

"You needn't mind sending up to me, if the child cries, nurse," said the surgeon, putting on his gloves slowly and thoughtfully.

"It's very likely it will be troublesome. Give it a little watery cereal." He put on his hat, pausing by the bedside on his way to the door.

"Good-night!" said the medical gentleman and walked away to dinner.

Finally, the infant proved that it was fine and Mr. Bumble, the beadle, gave it the name Oliver Twist. He named the orphans in alphabetical order: the last was "S", - Swubble. This was "T", - Twist. The next one was going to be Unwin, and the next Vilkins. He had got names ready made to the end of the alphabet, and all the way through it again, when they come to "Z".

What an excellent example of the power of dress, young Oliver Twist was! Wrapped in the blanket, which had formed his only covering, he might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar; it would have been hard for any stranger to identify what level of society he was from. But now (when the nurse put on him the old Calico dress of the work-house, which had grown yellow with use) he was badged and ticketed, and fell into his place at once - a parish child - the orphan of a work-house, left to the tender mercies of church-wardens and overseers - the humble, half-starved worker - to be hit and beaten through the world - despised by all, and pitied by none.

The workhouse authorities did not know what to do with the new infant, and so reported the case to the parish authorities. The latter sent Oliver to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty other infants rolled about the floor all day, and were not troubled with too much food, attention or clothing.

An elderly woman received seven-pence half-penny per small head per week. A great deal may be got for seven-pence half-penny - too much for an infant's stomach. The elderly female was a woman of wisdom and experience thought that way. She knew what was good for children, and she knew what was good for herself. So, she kept the greater part of the money for her own use. The children existed on the smallest possible portion of the weakest possible food. But the result of this system was that eight and a half cases out of ten died of hunger, cold or neglect.

Sometimes, when some unusually interesting accident happened to a child, there would be an inquiry

and troublesome questions by the people of the parish. But these were always stopped by the doctor and the beadle: the doctor always opened the body and proved that there was nothing inside (which was very true indeed), and the beadle always swore whatever the parish authorities wanted. Besides, the Board visited the branch-workhouse at regular intervals, and always sent the beadle the day before to say they were coming. The children looked fine, neat and clean when they came; and what more would the people have.

It cannot be expected that this system of education would produce any healthy, intelligent or creative crop of the children. Oliver Twist's ninth birthday found him a pale, thin child, somewhat small for his age. But nature or his parents had put a good strong spirit in his breast; and perhaps this may explain his having any ninth birthday at all. He was gifted to be a kind boy and living in rigid conditions only helped developing this unique and benevolent trait of character.

However, it was his ninth birthday, and he was keeping it in the coal-cellar with two other young gentlemen, who, after taking part with him in a sound beating, had been locked up for daring to say that they were hungry. When Mrs. Mann, the good lady of the house, returned from the coal-cellar, she was unexpectedly startled to see Mr. Bumble, the beadle, at the garden gate.

"Bless my soul! Is that you, Mr. Bumble, Sir?" said Mrs. Mann, putting her head out of the window. ("Susan, take Oliver and those two boys upstairs, and wash them at once.") – Why, Mr. Bumble, how glad I am to see you!"

"Oh, Lord!" said Mrs. Mann, running out to open the gate, – for the three boys had been removed from the cellar by this time. "Walk in, Sir, walk in, pray, Mr. Bumble, do, Sir."

But Mr. Bumble was angry for having been kept waiting, and he followed Mrs. Mann into the small

parlour in no pleasant mood. Mrs. Mann hurried to place a chair for him, and Mr. Bumble sat down, after having put his hat and cane on the table before him.

"Now don't be offended at what I'm going to say," said Mrs. Mann, in a sweet voice. "You've had a long walk, you know, or I wouldn't mention it. Now, will you take a little drop of something, Mr. Bumble?"

"Not a drop – not a drop," said Mr. Bumble.

"Now, just a little drop! With a little cold water and a lump of sugar!" said Mrs. Mann.

Mr. Bumble coughed. "What is it?" he inquired.

"Why, it's what I'm obliged to keep a little orphan in the house for the dear little infants when they are not well, Mr. Bumble," replied Mrs. Mann, as she opened a cupboard and took down a bottle and glass. "It's gin".

"Do you give the children gin, Mrs. Mann?" asked Mr. Bumble, watching how she was mixing it.

"Ah, God bless them, I do, however it takes costs! (dear though it is)," replied the lady. "I couldn't see them suffer before my very eyes, you know, sir."

"No," said Mr. Bumble; "No, you could not. You are a good, humane woman, Mrs. Mann." (Here she set down the glass.) – "I shall certainly mention it to the Board, Mrs. Mann." (He moved the glass towards him.) – "You feel as a mother, Mrs. Mann." (He took the glass of gin in his hand.) – "To your health, Mrs. Mann" – he said cheerfully and swallowed half of it.

"And now about business," said the beadle, taking out a leather pocket-book.

"The child Oliver Twist is nine years old today."

"Bless him!" said Mrs. Mann, rubbing her left eye with the corner of her apron.

"And notwithstanding a reward of ten pounds, which was afterwards increased to twenty pounds, and, I may say, in spite of the greatest efforts on the part of the parish," said Mr. Bumble, "we have never