

Chapter 1

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 workhouse¹; and in this workhouse was born; on a day and date which I need not trouble myself to repeat; the item of mortality² whose name is prefixed to the head of this chapter.

For a long time after it was ushered³ into this world of sorrow and trouble, by the parish surgeon⁴, 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 befall⁵ a human being, I do mean to say that in this particular instance⁶, it was the best thing for Oliver Twist that could by possibility have occurred.

The fact is, that there was considerable difficulty in inducing⁷ Oliver to take upon himself the office of respiration, --a troublesome⁸ practice, but one which custom has rendered necessary to our easy existence; and for some time he lay gasping⁹ on a little flock mattress, rather unequally poised between this world and the next:

¹ A place where poor people work in exchange for food a place to sleep

² The mortal object

³ Brought

⁴ The doctor of the town

⁵ Happen to

⁶ Case

⁷ Persuading

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 time¹⁰.

There being nobody by¹¹, however, but a pauper¹² old woman, who was rendered rather misty¹³ 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 struggles¹⁴, Oliver breathed, sneezed, and proceeded to advertise to the inmates¹⁵ of the workhouse the fact of a new burden¹⁶ 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 appendage¹⁷, 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 pale face of a young woman was raised feebly from the pillow; and a faint¹⁸ 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 of¹⁹ him:

'Oh, you must not talk about dying yet.'

The patient shook her head, and stretched out her hand towards the child.

⁸ Boring / difficult

⁹ Opening his mouth without breathing

¹⁰ Very quickly

¹¹ As nobody was next to him

¹² Poor

¹³ Not very clear

¹⁴ Efforts

¹⁵ Inhabitants

¹⁶ Trouble

¹⁷ Tool

¹⁸ Feeble / weak

¹⁹ Awaited from

The surgeon deposited it in her arms. She imprinted her cold white lips passionately on its forehead; passed her hands over her face; gazed²⁰ wildly round; shuddered²¹; fell back--and died. They chafed²² 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 cork²³ of the green bottle, which had fallen out on the pillow, as she stooped to take up the child. 'Poor dear!'

'You needn't mind²⁴ 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 gruel²⁵ 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 applied²⁶ herself to the green bottle, sat down on a low chair before the fire, and proceeded to²⁷ dress the infant.

²⁰ Looked

²¹ Trembled

²² Rubbed

²³ *bouchon*

²⁴ You don't need

²⁵ Oatmeal, water and salt mixed together

²⁶ Helped herself from

²⁷ Started to

What an excellent example of the power of dress, young Oliver Twist was! Wrapped²⁸ in the blanket which had hitherto²⁹ formed his only covering, he might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar; it would have been hard for the haughtiest³⁰ stranger to have assigned him his proper station in society. But now that he was enveloped in the old calico³¹ 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-starved³² drudge--to be cuffed and buffeted³³ through the world--despised by all, and pitied by none.

Oliver cried lustily³⁴. If he could have known that he was an orphan, left to the tender mercies of church-wardens³⁵ and overseers, perhaps he would have cried the louder³⁶.

Reading Guide

1/ The place

What are the "circumstances" of Oliver's Birth? Pick out elements describing what you know of life in a workhouse.

2/ The characters

Find the passages describing the people in this extract. Focus on their attitude. How do you react to each of them?

3/ The tone

What is Dickens's opinion of the workhouse? Of medicine and doctors? Describe the tone he mainly uses in this first chapter.

²⁸ *Emmitouflé*

²⁹ Until now / until then

³⁰ Disdainful / contemptuous

³¹ thick and coarse material

³² Half dying with hunger

³³ Smacked and hit

³⁴ A lot

³⁵ Guardians

³⁶ Even more