

CHAPTER TWO

Oliver's first job

Oliver stayed a prisoner alone in the dark room for a week. He cried bitterly all day, and when the long night came, he spread his little hands over his eyes to shut out the darkness, and tried to sleep. He was given freezing water to wash with, and was beaten daily by Mr Bumble in front of all the other boys in the hall, as a warning to them.

One day Mr Bumble met the local undertaker, Mr Sowerberry, outside the workhouse.

'Do you know anybody who wants to train a boy for work, Mr Sowerberry?' Mr Bumble pointed at the notice on the wall above him, which offered five pounds to anybody who would take Oliver Twist for work.

Mr Sowerberry rubbed his chin and thought for a while. 'I pay enough for the poor with my taxes,' he said, 'so why shouldn't I be able to make use of them in my work? Yes, I'll take the boy myself.'

And so the board agreed to send Oliver to work for the undertaker. The necessary papers were signed. Oliver's small possessions were put into a brown paper parcel, and he was led to Mr Sowerberry's house by Mr Rumble. As they walked along, tears began to run down Oliver's face.

'What is it this time?' asked Mr Bumble impatiently. 'Don't be so ungrateful. This gentleman is going to look after you.'

'It's just that I'm so lonely, sir!' said the child. 'Everybody hates me. Please don't be angry with me, sir!'

Even Mr Bumble felt a little pity. He coughed, told Oliver to dry his eyes and be a good boy, and walked on with him in silence.

The undertaker had just finished work for the day when Mr Bumble entered his shop.

'Here, I've brought the boy,' said the beadle.

Oliver bowed to the undertaker, who raised his candle to get a better view of the boy. 'Mrs Sowerberry,' he called, 'come and have a look.'

His wife, a short, thin woman with a disagreeable face, came out to see. 'He's very small,' she said immediately.

'He is,' agreed Mr Bumble, 'but he'll grow, Mrs Sowerberry.'

'Yes,' she said crossly, 'when he eats our food. Go on, get downstairs.' She pushed Oliver downstairs into a damp, dark kitchen, and called to the girl working down there. 'Here, Charlotte, give this boy some meat that the dog left - if he thinks it's good enough for him.'

Oliver tore the meat to pieces with his teeth as if he were a wild animal. Mrs Sowerberry watched him in silent horror, already thinking about her future food bills, then took him upstairs to the shop.

'You'll sleep here, among the coffins,' she said.

Oliver stared around the dark, airless shop at the coffins, some finished, some only half-made. He trembled at the thought of ghosts. His bed was a small hole in the floor, and looked very like a grave.

But it was not only the room that depressed Oliver. He felt very lonely, with no friends and no one to care for him. As he lay on the bed, he found himself wishing that it really was his grave.

The next morning he was woken up by someone kicking at the shop door.

'Open the door, will you?' shouted a voice through the keyhole. 'Yes, sir.'

'I suppose you're the new boy,' said the voice through the keyhole. 'How old are you?'

'Ten, sir.'

'Then I'll hit you when I get in,' said the voice.

Oliver was experienced enough to know that the promise was probably true. He opened the door with a shaking hand, then looked up and down the street. All he could see was a large boy wearing the uniform of one of the charity schools, where the children of the very poor used to go.

'Did you want a coffin?' asked Oliver, innocently.

The charity-boy looked at him fiercely. 'You'll be needing a coffin soon, Workhouse, if you make jokes like that! I'm Mister Noah Claypole, and you're working under me. Now, hurry up and open the curtains!' As he said this, he kicked Oliver and entered the shop. He was a big, clumsy boy of about fourteen, with a large head and very small eyes. Added to these attractions were a red nose and dirty yellow trousers.

The boys went down to breakfast, which the girl Charlotte had made for them. She gave an extra piece of meat to Noah, then told Oliver to hurry up as it was his job to look after the shop.

'Did you hear that, Workhouse?' shouted Noah.

'He heard, Noah,' said Charlotte. 'Leave him alone.'

'Why?' asked Noah. 'All his relations have already left him alone. His mother and father aren't going to interfere with him!' Charlotte and Noah both started laughing loudly, Oliver sat alone in the corner, eating old bits of bread.

Noah was a charity-boy, but not a workhouse orphan; he at least knew who his parents were. But for a long time all the local shop-boys had insulted him because he wore the uniform of a charity-boy. Now fortune had brought him a creature in an even lower position in society than

himself. Noah intended to repay to Oliver every insult he had ever received, and to make the new boy's life a misery.

After a few weeks, Mr Sowerberry decided that he liked Oliver's appearance enough to train him in the undertaking business. Oliver's permanent expression of sadness was very suitable, the undertaker thought, for collecting dead bodies from houses and accompanying the coffins to funerals.

One day Mr Bumble came to tell them about a woman who had died in an extremely poor part of the town, and Sowerberry and Oliver went to collect the body. They went down dusty narrow streets where the houses on either side were tall and large, but very old. Some of the houses were almost falling down, and had to be supported by huge blocks of wood. The area was so poor that even the dead rats in the street looked as though they had died of hunger.

They found the right house, and climbed the dark stairs to a miserable little room. Some children watched them from the shadows as they entered. Something lay beneath a blanket on the floor in one corner. A man and an old woman stood near the body. Oliver was afraid to look at them. With their thin faces and sharp teeth, they looked like the rats he had seen outside.

As Sowerberry began to measure the body for a coffin, the man knelt on the floor and cried out, 'She starved to death, I tell you! That's why she died!' He fell to the floor, and all the children behind him started to cry. Sowerberry and Oliver, their work done, left as fast as they could.

They returned the next day with the coffin and four men from the workhouse who were to carry it. The man and the old woman followed the coffin to the church, and waited silently by the grave for the priest to arrive. When at last he came, he hurried through the burial prayers, and as quickly as possible (it was only a job, after all) the coffin was put into the ground. At this point the husband, who had not moved once during his wife's burial - not even during the long wait for the priest - suddenly fainted to the ground and had to have cold water thrown over him.

'So how did you like it, Oliver?' asked Sowerberry later, as they walked home.

'Not very much, sir,' Oliver answered truthfully.

'You'll get used to it, my boy.'

Oliver wondered how long that would take, and remained silent all the way back to the shop, thinking about everything that he had seen and heard.

CHAPTER THREE

Oliver goes to London

Oliver was now officially an undertaker's assistant. It was a good, sickly time of year, and coffins were selling well. Oliver gained a lot of experience in a short time, and was interested to see how brave some people were after a death in the family. During funerals for some rich people, for example, he saw that the people who had cried the loudest in church usually recovered the fastest afterwards.

He noticed how in other wealthy families the wife or the husband often seemed quite cheerful and calm despite the recent death - just as if nothing had happened. Oliver was very surprised to see all this, and greatly admired them for controlling their sadness so well.

He was treated badly by most of the people around him. Noah was jealous because Oliver went out to burials while he was left back in the shop, so he treated him even worse than before.

Charlotte treated him badly because Noah did. And Mrs Sowerberry was his enemy because Mr Sowerberry was supposed to be his friend.

One day something happened which might seem unimportant, but which had a great effect on Oliver's future. Noah was in a particularly bad mood one dinner-time, and so he tried to make Oliver cry by hitting him, pulling his hair, and calling him horrible names. This was all unsuccessful, so he tried personal insults. 'Workhouse, how's your mother?' he asked.

'She's dead,' replied Oliver, his face going red with emotion. Noah hoped that Oliver was going to cry, so he continued. 'What did she die of, Workhouse?'

'Of a broken heart, I was told.' And a tear rolled down Oliver's cheek.

'Why are you crying, Workhouse?'

Oliver remained silent, and Noah grew braver. 'You know, I feel very sorry for you, Workhouse, but the truth is your mother was a wicked woman.'

Oliver seemed suddenly to wake up. 'What did you say?'

'She was so bad it was lucky she died, or she would have ended up in prison, or hung.'

His face bright red with anger, Oliver jumped up, seized Noah's throat, and shook the older boy so violently that his teeth nearly fell out. Then he hit him with all his strength and knocked him to the ground.

'He'll murder me!' screamed Noah. 'Charlotte! Help! Oliver's gone mad-'

Charlotte and Mrs Sowerberry ran in and screamed in horror. They took hold of Oliver and began to beat him. Then Noah got up and started to kick him from behind. When they were all tired, they forced Oliver, who was still fighting and shouting, into the cellar and locked it.

Mrs Sowerberry sat down, breathing heavily. 'He's like a wild animal!' she said. 'We could all have been murdered in our beds!'

'I hope Mr Sowerberry doesn't take any more of these dreadful creatures from the workhouse,' said Charlotte. 'Poor Noah was nearly killed!' Mrs Sowerberry looked at Noah sympathetically.

Noah, who was twice Oliver's size, pretended to rub tears from his eyes.

'What shall we do?' cried Mrs Sowerberry. 'He'll kick that door down in ten minutes.' They could hear Oliver banging and kicking at the cellar door. 'Noah - run and get Mr Bumble.'

So Noah ran through the streets as quickly as he could to fetch the beadle. When he reached the workhouse, he waited for a minute to make sure his face was suitably tearful and frightened.

As soon as Mr Bumble came out, Noah cried, 'Mr Bumble! Mr Bumble! It's Oliver Twist, sir. He's become violent. He tried to murder me, sir! And Charlotte, and Mrs Sowerberry as well.'

Mr Bumble was shocked and angry. 'Did he? I'll come up there immediately and beat him with my stick.'

When he arrived at the shop, Oliver was still kicking wildly at the cellar door.

'Let me out!' he shouted from the cellar, when he heard Mr Bumble's voice. 'I'm not afraid of you!'

Mr Bumble stopped for a moment, amazed and even rather frightened by this change in Oliver. Then he said to Mrs Sowerberry, 'It's the meat that's caused this, you know.'

'What?'

'Meat, madam. You've fed him too well here. Back in the workhouse this would never have happened.'

'I knew I was too generous to him,' said Mrs Sowerberry, raising her eyes to the ceiling.

At that moment Mr Sowerberry returned and, hearing what had happened (according to the ladies), he beat Oliver so hard that even Mr Bumble and Mrs Sowerberry were satisfied. Mr Sowerberry was not a cruel man, but he had no choice. He knew that if he didn't punish Oliver, his wife would never forgive him.

That night, alone in the room with the coffins, Oliver cried bitter, lonely tears. He did not sleep, and very early in the morning, before anyone was awake, he quietly unlocked the shop door and left the house. He ran up the street and through the town as far as the main road, where he saw a sign that told him it was just seventy miles from there to London. The name London gave the boy an idea. That huge place! Nobody, not even Mr Bumble, could ever find him there! He had heard old men in the workhouse

say it was a good place for brave boys, and that there was always work there for those that wanted it. It would be the best place for him. He jumped to his feet and walked forward again.

But after only four miles he began to realize just how far he would have to walk. He stopped to think about it. He had a piece of bread, a rough shirt, two pairs of socks and a penny. But he could not see how these would help him get to London any faster, so he continued walking.

He walked twenty miles that day. The only thing he had to eat was his piece of bread and some water which he begged from houses near the road. He slept the first night in a field, feeling lonely, tired, cold and hungry. He was even hungrier the next morning when he woke up, and he had to buy some more bread with his penny. That day he walked only twelve miles. His legs were so weak that they shook beneath him.

The next day he tried to beg for money, but large signs in some villages warned him that anyone caught begging would be sent to prison. Travellers on the road refused to give him money; they said he was a lazy young dog and didn't deserve anything. Farmers threatened to send their dogs after him. When he waited outside pubs, the pub-owners chased him away because they thought he had come to steal something. Only two people were kind enough to feed him: an old woman and a gate-keeper on the road. If they had not given him some food, he surely would have died like his mother.

Early on the seventh morning of his journey, Oliver finally reached the little town of Barnet, just outside London. Exhausted, he sat down at the side of the road. His feet were bleeding and he was covered in dust. He was too tired even to beg. Then he noticed that a boy, who had passed him a few minutes before, had returned, and was now looking at him carefully from the opposite side of the road. After a long time the boy crossed the road and said to Oliver, 'Hello! What's the matter then?'

The boy was about Oliver's age, but was one of the strangest-looking people he had ever seen. He had a dirty, ordinary boy's face, but he behaved as if he were an adult. He was short for his age and had little, sharp, ugly eyes. His hat was stuck on top of his head but it looked as though it would

blow off at any minute. He wore a man's coat which reached almost down to his feet, with sleeves so long that his hands were completely covered.

'I'm very tired and hungry,' answered Oliver, almost crying. 'I've been walking for a week.'

'A week! The magistrate's order, was it?'

'The magistrate? What's that?'

'A magistrate's a kind of judge,' explained the surprised young gentleman. He realized Oliver did not have much experience of the world. 'Never mind that. You want some food,' he went on. 'I haven't got much money but don't worry - I'll pay.'

The boy helped Oliver to his feet, and took him to a pub. Meat, bread, and beer were placed before Oliver, and his new friend urged him to satisfy his hunger. While Oliver was eating, the strange boy looked at him from time to time with great attention.

'Going to London?' he asked him finally.

'Yes.'

'Got anywhere to live?'

'No.'

'Money?'

'No.'

The strange boy whistled, and put his arms into his pockets as far as the big coat sleeves would allow him. 'I suppose you want to sleep somewhere tonight, don't you?'

'I do,' replied Oliver. 'I haven't slept under a roof since I started my journey.'

'Well, don't worry. I've got to be in London tonight, and I know a very nice old gentleman there who'll let you live in his place and not even ask you for money!'

Oliver was deeply grateful for this offer of shelter and talked for a long time with his new friend. His name was Jack Dawkins, but he was usually called 'The Artful Dodger'. 'Artful' because he was very clever at getting what he wanted; and 'Dodger' because he was very good at not getting caught when he did something wrong. When he heard this, Oliver felt rather doubtful about having such a friend. However, he wanted first to meet the kind old gentleman in London, who would help him. After that, he could decide whether to continue the friendship with the Artful Dodger.