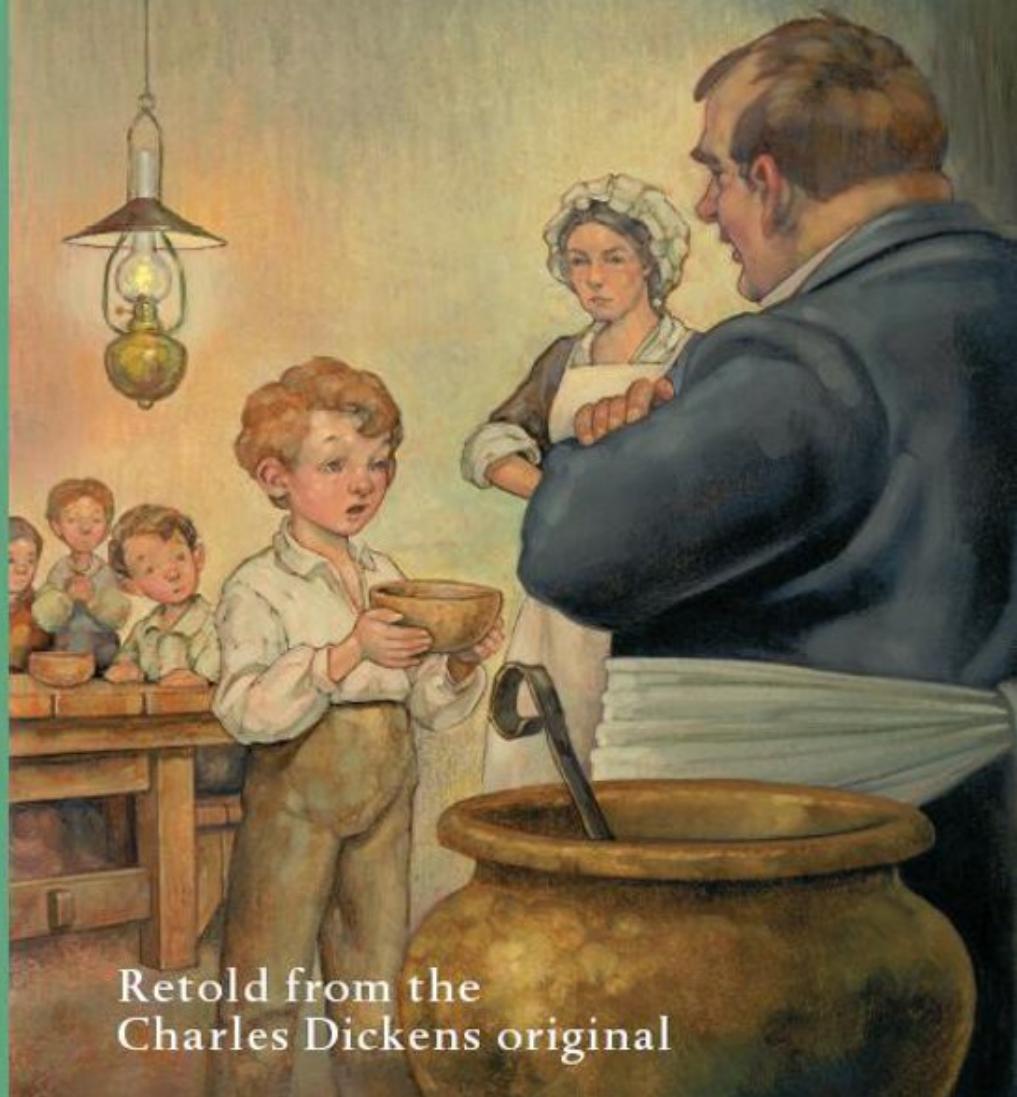


CLASSIC STARTS™

Oliver Twist



Retold from the
Charles Dickens original



Oliver Twist



*Retold from the Charles Dickens
original by Kathleen Olmstead*

Illustrated by Dan Andreasen



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CHAPTER 1

Oliver Twist



Regrettably, our story must begin on a note of sadness. It is an unfortunate truth that not all beginnings are happy ones. This particular story opens in a workhouse. There was a time—the same time that our story takes place—when too many cities and towns were home to these large, cold buildings. Men who could not pay their bills were sentenced to hard labor here. Women and children with no place else to go lived and worked here. Children left on doorsteps with no family to call their own spent their days in the bottle-washing factories. There is nothing beautiful or warm one can say about a workhouse. Only that this is where our young hero, Oliver Twist, came into the world.

In fact, there was almost no story to tell at all. For the first few moments of his life, Oliver did not take to breathing right away. Now, things might have been different had he been surrounded by loving aunts and grandmothers. They would have fussed and worried over him. Unfortunately, there was only the doctor, who quickly turned back to the fire, and an old woman who sat with Oliver and his mother. So, it was up to the baby to fight it out on his own. And fight he did. After a few sniffs, some struggling coughs, and a sneeze he let out a long—and quite strong—wail.

The blanket on the bed rustled as Oliver's mother moved. She slowly raised her pale face from the pillow and said quietly, "Let me see the child before I die."

The doctor looked back from the fire. "Oh, you must not talk about dying yet," he said.

"I should say not!" the old woman added. "When she has lived as long as I have then she can talk about dying. I've brought thirteen children into this world and watched all but two die. I know a thing or two about living and dying. She has no reason to talk like that."

The patient shook her head. She stretched her hand toward the child. The doctor placed Oliver in her arms. She pressed her cold white lips onto the baby's forehead. It was a tender, loving kiss. This was a special moment between mother and son. She then passed her hand over her own face. Her head dropped onto the pillow and she was dead. The doctor and old woman worked to save her. They pounded on her chest and rubbed her hands, but there was no use. She was gone.

"Oh, the poor dear," the old woman cried. "How sad for the little one." She picked Oliver up. He lay quietly in her arms.

"Well, there's nothing more I can do," the doctor said. He put his hat on and picked up his bag. "If the child cries, you can give him some gruel."

He stopped before heading out the door. "Shame, too. She was a pretty young thing. Do you have any idea who she was or where she came from?"

"None, sir," the old woman replied. "She arrived last night during that terrible rain. No shoes, no bags. She was very sick and ready to give birth."

The doctor walked back to the bed. He raised the young woman's left hand. "The same old story," he said, shaking his head. "I see there's no wedding ring. Ah, well! Good night," he said and quickly walked out the door.

The old woman sat before the fire and wrapped the infant in a blanket. She told the woman who ran the workhouse, Mrs. Bumble, that a baby boy had been born.

"Ach," Mrs. Bumble said. "Another orphan for the workhouse to take care of." She looked at the baby with disgust. "Another mouth to feed. More money from my small allowance."

There was nothing to envy in the life of an orphan. Especially an orphan raised in the workhouse. Their lives were filled with hard work, little play, and very little food. Very few showed pity or kindness toward them, especially those people who took care of them.

Mr. Bumble, the husband of the woman who ran the workhouse, was a town official. The workhouse was one of his responsibilities. He made sure that everything was to the liking of the town council and workhouse board. He was a man who liked to use his power, but failed to realize that no one feared him. His wife, in particular, thought him foolish. The Bumbles looked like one another. Both were short, round, and mean-spirited.

It was Mr. Bumble who gave Oliver his last name. He used the alphabet to keep track of all the new orphan names. When the last orphan came to them,

Bumble was at the letter S. Therefore, Bumble gave him the name Swubble. As T was next in line, this baby was named Twist. The orphan after Oliver received the name Unwith, and the one after that Vilkins.

“Very good, Mr. Bumble,” Mrs. Bumble said. She wrote Oliver’s name in the registry book. “It’s official now.”

“All a part of the job, Mrs. Bumble,” Mr. Bumble answered. “A town official’s job is rarely done.” Mr. Bumble did not notice his wife rolling her eyes at his comment. He was too distracted by the screaming baby beside him.

Oliver cried loudly. If he could have known that he was an orphan, left to the not-so-tender mercies of church-wardens and the workhouse staff, perhaps he would have cried all the louder.