

CHAPTER 1

SOMEWHERE IN ENGLAND THERE WAS A SMALL TOWN, WHICH was much like all the other small towns around the year 1830. In the middle of this town was a building called the workhouse. It was a plain brick building for very poor people. Here they could find shelter or food if they were starving, but only the hungriest and most desperate went there. In the workhouse, a baby boy had just been born. It wasn't clear if the baby would live, because he was having trouble breathing. But after a struggle, the baby breathed, sneezed, and then started to cry as loud as he could.

A young woman raised her pale face from the pillow. In a low voice she said: "Let me see the child, and then die."

"Oh, you must not talk of dying yet!" said the doctor kindly, as he took the baby and gave him to his mother. She kissed her son's forehead with her cold lips. The doctor saw that she was very weak, and left the room to get some more medicine. Meanwhile, the young woman took a gold locket from around her neck, and gave it to the nurse.

"This is the only thing I own," she said. "You must give it to my son when he is older." Then she took one last look at her baby, shivered, and fell back – dead!

Curious, the nurse looked at the locket. She opened it, and saw two locks of hair, and a gold wedding ring. The name "Agnes" was written inside the ring, but there was no last name. When she heard the doctor returning, she quickly dropped the gold locket into her pocket.

"It is all over," the doctor said, after a glance at the young mother. "She was a good-looking woman. Who was she? Where did she come from?"

"She was found lying in the street last night," replied the nurse. "Her shoes were worn out from walking. But we don't know her name, or where she came from, or where she was going." The nurse didn't say anything about the gold locket in her pocket.



The matron of the workhouse picked two letters from the alphabet, O and T, and named the boy Oliver Twist. If the baby had known what his life would be like at the workhouse, he would probably have cried even louder. He was just one of many babies born there, often without names. The government gave the matron, Mrs Corney, a little money to feed each child. But Mrs Corney liked money much more than she liked the miserable children and she kept most of the money for herself.

By the time Oliver was ten years old, he was very thin and short, with a pale but sweet face. One day Mrs Corney called him to speak to him.

"You know you're an orphan – that you have no father or mother, and that you have been brought up by us here?"

"Yes ma'am," said Oliver, shaking with fear.

"You must be taught a useful trade," said the matron.

"Tomorrow morning, you will begin picking oakum."

Picking oakum was taking apart old ropes from ships, so that the fibres could be reused. It was very hard work and Oliver's back hurt and his hands were covered in blisters all the time.



Working all day meant that Oliver was even hungrier by dinner time. However, Mrs Corney had found another way to save money. This was to add a lot of water to the soup. Every day each boy in the orphanage was only allowed one bowl of that watery soup. Oliver was starving. He picked up his empty bowl and went to the cook.

"Please sir, I want some more," he said.

The whole room fell silent. "What!" the cook finally said, angrily. Nobody had ever dared ask for more.

"Please sir," replied Oliver, "I want some more."

The man couldn't say a word. He hit Oliver on the head with the ladle and rushed out to Mrs Corney's office.

"Ungrateful child!" shouted the matron when she was informed about the incident. "That boy will be hanged one day. Lock him up in the basement!"

It was also decided that Oliver would be sent to work as an apprentice. Mrs Corney wanted him away from the workhouse as soon as possible.

The boy, however, had other plans – he was going to run away to London.

CHAPTER 1

Comprehension

1 Decide if the following statements are True or False.

1. Only the very poor chose to stay in the workhouse. ☐
2. The nurse put the locket around the baby's neck. ☐
3. The nurse didn't know where the young woman came from. ☐
4. Mrs Corney kept most of the money given by the government for herself. ☐
5. Each boy at the orphanage had two bowls of soup every day. ☐

2 Choose the correct answer.

1. When the baby was born
 - a. he wasn't breathing at all.
 - b. he started crying.
 - c. he was having trouble breathing.
2. Inside the ring there was
 - a. a first name but no last name written.
 - b. a last name but no first name written.
 - c. neither a first name nor a last name written.
3. Oliver found out that picking oakum
 - a. was an easy job.
 - b. was a very hard job.
 - c. was a useful trade.
4. The cook hit Oliver because
 - a. he said he didn't like the food.
 - b. he asked for another bowl of soup.
 - c. he didn't eat his soup.
5. Oliver's plan was
 - a. to continue picking oakum in the workhouse.
 - b. to run away and work as an apprentice.
 - c. to run away to London.

Vocabulary

3 Complete the sentences using the words in the box.

weak starving useful government miserable ungrateful curious

1. The Internet can be very _____ if you're looking for information.

2. My brother felt _____ when we moved to a new city, because he missed his friends.
3. Barbara hadn't eaten anything all day and she was _____ by lunchtime.
4. She is so _____! She is always asking questions about everything.
5. I don't like _____ people who do not appreciate what others have done for them.
6. Lauren is still very _____ after her illness.
7. The _____ should give some money to the poor to help them.

4 Find words in Chapter 1 to match the definitions below. The first letter has been given for you.

1. not bright in colour, almost white p _____ (page 4)
2. something you take to cure an illness m _____ (page 4)
3. a large deep spoon for serving soup l _____ (page 7)
4. a minor event, a happening i _____ (page 7)
5. the part of a building which is under the ground b _____ (page 7)

Follow-up activities

5 Discuss.

1. What do you think of Mrs Corney's attitude towards Oliver?
2. What do you think about life in a workhouse back in 1830? Is there anything like that today?
3. Oliver had to work hard picking oakum in the workhouse. Do children have to work nowadays? If yes, on what occasions?
4. Do you think Oliver will be able to carry out his plan? Why? / Why not?

6 Imagine you are Oliver keeping a diary. Make a diary with all the notes you have made concerning the last few days of your life in the workhouse. (60-80 words)