Chapter 1

In which we examine the worth of girls and introduce the other Twist in this tale

Girls! The female of the species. The fairer, the gentler … some say the weaker sex. Girls, young ladies, little women: call them what you will, but in this England of 1828 – where our tale begins – the melancholy fact remains that girls are considered not worthless but most certainly worth *less* than their brothers and fathers and sons and nephews. In short, girls are worth less than boys!

Worth less, how? I hear you ask. Why, quite simply in pounds, shillings and pence. When we calculate what it costs to feed and clothe a female child, particularly of the orphan variety (though gruel and rags be all they are fit for) versus the revenue said girls might yield when – or if – they are fully grown (for many orphans have

the temerity to die before they have repaid their debt to a society that has contrived to starve them to the grave!) it seems, alas, that employers will pay more for a boy apprentice than they will for a girl. The parish may sell on girl orphans as maidservants or kitchen wenches, but their wages over a lifetime are paltry compared to that earned by their menfolk. Yes, the facts and figures are incontestable: girls are – all in all – worth a great deal less than boys.

And it is this very circumstance that leads to the twist in our tale. Or perhaps I should say the *other* twist, for indeed there were two: one boy, one girl. My dear reader, you have no doubt heard the tale of Master Oliver Twist: that rags-to-riches Cinderella-boy, the parish orphan who became heir to the Brownlow fortune. But what few know – indeed there are only two on this earth who know the truth – was that the very night when that unfortunate woman birthed young Oliver, she brought forth first a girl babe into this unfeeling world. A second Twist, or really a first – ahead of her brother in every way – for young Miss Twist came out screaming and lusty, hale and hearty.

"'Tis a girl!" declared the midwife of the Mudfog workhouse, a wretched being named Old Sal, who took a sip from a small green bottle and rolled her eyes

as she beheld the child. "Lawks, a-mercy, 'tis a crying shame! Waste of all that effort, ask me!"

Then that good woman set the girl aside on a little flock mattress, and focused her attention on the puling, mewling, kitten-like creature that was to be Master Oliver Twist.

"A boy, sir!" she declared when Oliver – after some moments of apparent uncertainty – gave forth his first sickly cry. "But a weakly one. Not like to survive, you ask me!"

"Did I ask you? Did I?" blustered the beadle who was in attendance – a corpulent, red-faced gentleman whose waistcoat was cut a little too meanly for his splendidly mountainous belly. "A girl *and* a boy! Two little burdens on the parish purse! What was this reckless young woman thinking?"

Alas, the thoughts of the reckless young woman, now mother to twins, we shall never know as – having whispered her last desperate words to Old Sal the midwife and pressed some items that will be of significance later in this story into that old crone's hands – she let out a last gasp in this world and expired.

"Why, the boy might fetch a sum as an apprentice but as for the *female*." The beadle – whose name I should here record was Mr Bumble – paused and sniffed the

air like he was nosing out a good wine. "I fear we must allow Mother Nature to take care of her."

At this Old Sal – who had been more affected by the last confession of the young mother than the contents of her green bottle were able to overcome – looked up in alarm. "Bu' she's a lusty one, Misser Bumble! 'Tis a shame, so it be!"

For she knew what Mr Bumble meant by "Mother Nature's care". It was the same "care" the workhouse authorities administered to unwanted kittens and the kitchen dog's pups, who were tied in a sack and thrown in the canal for the good Lord to "take care on 'em".

"The last thing this world needs is another squawking female!" blustered Mr Bumble, wheezily standing over Oliver's deceased mother, a delicate-looking creature with translucent skin and large cornflower-blue eyes, now closed forever. "We'll take the boy to the cottage orphanage and see what we can make of him, but the other one – the *girl*…" He pronounced the phrase as if the very vowels were sulphurous. "Let me hear no more of her."

And so it was that on that snowy night in the town of Mudfog, some distance south of the great city of London itself, the other Twist in our tale found herself dumped a little way down by the riverside on a rubbish

heap in the snow – a bundle of white rags containing a tiny twist of paper, and a red and screaming infant.

But nobody had informed young Mistress Twist of the prevailing wisdom on the worthlessness of girls. She had not been made aware that young ladies should be seen and not heard, nor that they deserved neither to be fed, nor listened to. And so this particular young lady demanded to be not only heard but fed – and fed right now.

And thus it was that several good citizens of the parish encountered her – passing by the screaming bundle with upturned noses and exclamations on the loose morals of mothers who abandon their offspring to lie screaming in the snow.

And so young Mistress Twist might have ended her days – and this tale – had she not been found by a young lady by the name of Baggage Jones.