



*Historical  
stories*

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# *A Bit of Blue Sky*

### Chapter One



### Meet the Family

#### Benjamin, age 8

I'm Benjie. My father died last year and my mother couldn't afford to keep us all. So she took three of us down to the workhouse. My sister howled because they took her to the bathroom first and scrubbed her something cruel. My brother and I went in a bath together, and then they put clean clothes on us. Rough, they were, brown and scratchy. I did cry a bit too when our mam left us. I did wonder if I'd ever see her again.

#### Eliza, age 9

I'm Lizzie. I begged and pleaded with our mam not to take us to the workhouse but what could she do? She had no money and six of us to feed. She said it was for the best, that we'd be fed and we'd be taught a trade. I know she loves us, but she had to keep the babies and let us go.



I couldn't stop from blubbing when they cropped my hair as if I was a sheep. At tea time I thought of our little cottage and the fire going and mam feeding the baby. In here we all sit on long benches and we can't talk. We had bread and cheese tonight but I couldn't eat for crying.

**Thomas, age 11**

I'm Thomas. I'm the eldest of our family and I try to look after Benjie and Lizzie. Specially Lizzie, for she's lame. When my dad was dying he said that I was the man now. But it's hard being taken away from home and treated like a child. I have a quick temper on me that leads me astray over and over.

We walked up to the workhouse. There's a great wall all around it, and I had to pull the bell rope at the gates. The porter looked at us like we were vermin. When we came in, they took all our things – not that we had much. Just Benjie's penny whistle, Lizzie's sewing and my whittling knife.

We had to go before the Guardians, standing in a row with our knees knocking. Some fat starchy ladies and gentlemen looked us up and down and told us we should be grateful to the



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Parish. Then they wrote in a book but we didn't know how to sign our names. We just put a cross. I wonder what they thought of us.

One good thing, they give us boots. We only had one pair between us when we come, and those had the soles flapping loose from all of us children wearing them out. Mostly we had to go barefoot. Bad in winter, and my chilblains itched at night. So new boots were good. They say they'll school us, too. I would like that. I've never been to school, we didn't have the boots and we didn't have the money.



## Chapter Two

### Settling In

#### Benjie

In the morning they ring a bell and we have to stand by our beds. My belly is so empty, it feels like paper stuck together. Porridge for breakfast, thin and grey and tasting of dishwater. Porridge and a piece of dry bread.



Then to the school room. We sat on long benches and I couldn't see out of the windows, they were too high. My heart beat hard when the master called me out to the front. I couldn't write my name on the board and I could hear the other boys laughing. But I'm going to learn.

The master is kind and smiles and lays his hand on my head and says "Strive, strive, my boy." He was in the workhouse when he was a lad and he bettered himself. He went off to London town and trained for a teacher. And now he's back with a suit of good cloth and shiny boots. I'm going to better myself, I am.

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### **Lizzie**

The workhouse is like some great grey church. The tall clocktower seems to be frowning at me. The building is full of dark corners and the smell of washing. The stone stairs up to bed are all worn in the middle. It makes me sad to think of all those lonely children's feet going up them. And it's strange not being in our big brass bed with my sisters to keep me warm. There's rows of us here, but all separate, in little iron beds.

What I can't bear is that I can't be with Thomas and Benjie. The boys go one way and the girls the other. We don't see each other except at meal times and on Sundays. This morning I could see little Benjie at breakfast and he was crying, "I want Lizzie." It fair broke my heart. But he's got Thomas there with him, which is something. And there's a big girl who has the bed next to mine, Mags she's called, and she has a bad leg like me. She has a brother too, maybe he'll look out for my two.

Mags says it's not so bad here if you keep on the straight and narrow. She says we'll get taught how to sew and then we'll get a wage when we're old enough.



### Thomas

It's true, they do school us. The schoolroom's warm with a big stove in the middle. There's a text on the wall saying The World is Full of Beautiful Things. Not in here, it's not.

I sat with a boy called Matthew who doesn't care what he says or does. He whispered to me how he absconded, that's run away I think. But they caught him and put him in the punishment cell. In the afternoon we went to the workshop to learn to make shoes. Hard work it was, and I got rapped on the knuckles for looking out the window but I picked it up fast.

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### Light and Dark

#### Benjie

This day was a mix of good and very bad. The good was strange, I'll tell you what it was.

We were in the schoolroom doing our reading. I like that, and I can write my name now. Teacher says if I work hard I'll get a trade, and not be at the mercy of the farmer, like my poor dad was. The farmer was a cruel man, he worked my dad so hard and gave him so little.

While we were sitting at our work, in came a lady dressed in black with a veil hiding her face. We all had to stand and say good morning to her. Some of us read out loud from the bible. She walked between our desks looking at our work, and when she came to my desk, she stopped. She put her hand under my chin to lift my face. "So like my Alexander," she whispered. Her voice was full of sadness. She asked my name, and lifted her veil, and kissed me. "Bless you Benjamin," she said, and then she was gone.





The master told us we had done well. “That lady is the vicar’s wife,” he said. “She lost her boy to the smallpox a few months past.” She stayed in my mind. Nobody had kissed me since we were with our mother.

But you remember I said this day was good and very bad, and I haven’t told you the very bad yet. They put my brother Thomas in the punishment cell. And they thrashed me for shouting out against it.

### **Lizzie**

Thomas did something for my sake today, but he’s paid dearly for it and so has Benjie. It’s not fair. When we came out of supper, some children who didn’t know any better were scoffing and laughing at my leg, and my hopping walk. And Thomas took them on,



even though they were great lads, and he bloodied their noses. The Master come up with a scowl and said Thomas was disorderly. Next thing I know, Thomas has knocked the Master’s cap off.

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### Thomas

It's dark in here, and cold, and there's a scrabbly noise which must be rats. Though what rats would hope to find here I don't know, seeing as how I've eaten every crumb of the bread they gave me. I'm in this cell for 48 hours, with nothing but bread and water. They say I'm refractory.

It's too harsh, and it's wrong, but they won't break my spirit. My body may be cold but my heart is red hot with anger.

