

Chapter 1

Charlie Whiteneck ran down the New York City sidewalk, jingling the many coins in his pocket. His long blond hair stuck out of ever side of his hat. The weight of the coins actually pulled on his knickers. It was a tremendous take for one evening and his dad was bound to be proud of him, or at least satisfied. Life had been hard on the family since his father lost his regular job the year before. Now they all had to help pay the bills. Their mother did sewing projects for people to make a little, and their father did odd jobs. But these, along with his newspaper money, wasn't enough to pay the rent, and the landlord had threatened to kick them out more than once if they didn't pay soon. Yes, the year 1911 had been hard on them. Now that spring had come, Charlie was hoping their luck would change in 1912. It sure had this day!

He pushed his hair away from his eyes so he wouldn't run into anyone. Finally he arrived at their lower east side apartment building that had been home to him as long as he could remember. It wasn't much from the outside or inside. The tall structure housed more people than it should have, rough people



who weren't very kind to him. But then they had their own problems to worry about. The Whiteneck apartment, like many in the building, was two rooms on the second floor. The larger room was a combination of small parlor and a kitchen. To

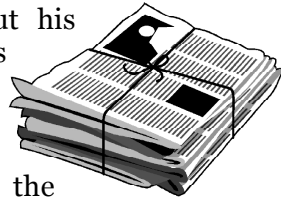
the right of the kitchen was one bedroom. Charlie, and his seven year old sister Sarah, slept in the two chairs in the parlor and this worked all right, except when their pa came in drunk late at night and awoke them.

The nine year old lad jumped up the stairs as quickly as he could and ran down the hall to their door. Flinging it open excitedly, he bounded in.

His father was reclining in the worn, cushioned chair Charlie called a bed, his head back as if asleep. Though they were always near starvation, somehow he still managed to be overweight. His several day old beard reminded Charlie of a scared cat. The boy's seven year old sister Sarah was curled up in her chair, staring across the room.

Charlie swung the door shut, but it banged louder than he expected. His father jerked upright and scowled. "Quit slammin' da door," he slurred. "How many times I tell ya not to. . ." but his voice faded out.

"Pa," Charlie greeted, holding out his handful of coins, "you'll never guess how much I got selling papers today! It was over a dollar! One man even gave me a dime just for one paper! That's because everyone wants to read about the Titanic sinking. I even bought more papers and sold them too. I would have brought you home a paper but I sold-



His father slapped the boy's hand, sending the coins flying across the floor. "If it's so good, why don't ya get more papers and get back out there and sell them. You're not making nothin' standing here yappin', and I can't run dis house on a dollar," he snarled loudly.

"Oh, Clarence, why don't you say something nice to Charlie for a change." It was the voice of their mother chiding him from the kitchen. "He done what he could to please-" But her sentence was interrupted by repeating coughing. Finally she sat down. "Let him rest for a few minutes and get some supper."

"Shut up, woman," he yelled again, turning toward the kitchen. "I'm runnin' dish house and I don't need no help from you. And if you keep coughin' like that, you're sleepin' outside tonight, ya hear?" Then turning to Charlie again, he continued, "Now get back out there and sell more papers." The man

pushed Charlie against the wall, knocking his hat off, then flopped into the chair again.

The lad sat down, grabbing his cap, and pressed himself into the corner. He was hungry and tired but experience had taught him that there was no point in even mentioning this when his father was drunk. "Pa, can't I get some grub first like Ma said?"

"No, you lazy kid!" he yelled. "You earn it first!" He got up and lumbered toward Charlie who anticipated more slurred yelling. Instead he slapped Charlie so hard, his head slammed against the wall. His father had a whip-like backhand, but Charlie usually dodged it in time. This time he didn't. The boy held the sore spot on his head, chastising himself for not being more alert. Sarah curled up even smaller and began to cry, her matted blond hair draped over her left cheek.

Their dad turned and grabbed the girl's hand, yanking her out of the chair. "Please don't hit me again, Poppa," she begged, holding her free arm over her head.

"Shut up! You're good for nothin' sittin' here, snivelin'. Here, take her wid ya and bring back double," he ordered. "At her age she ought to be out workin', not sittin' here snivelin'." He pushed them both through the door, slamming it behind them.

Sarah grabbed hold of Charlie's back pocket, sobbing into his dirty, torn shirt.

"You shouldn't cry," Charlie chided. "After all, that could have been worse. He didn't even hit you this time. Must be your lucky day."

"You didn't see what he done before you got home. I was trying to be real quiet so he'd forget I was there, but I couldn't help crying when I saw him hit you."

"That's all right then. Come on. I'll get some papers some-where and we can sneak some of the money to buy us some-thing to eat."

"But I ain't got my shoes on," Sarah said.

"Oh, great! Now what are we going to do? If I go back and he sees me, I'll get hit again. You'll have to go bare foot."

She shook her head. "I can't. It's too cold."

"Oh, all right. You wait here on the stairs, and I'll see if I can get them without Pa seeing me." Charlie returned to their door and turned the knob silently. Peeking in, he could see his

Pa resting on his hands, leaning over the wash basin in the kitchen. The lad slipped in, retrieved the shoes, and slipped out again.

"Success!" he announced, holding up the prize. Sarah thanked him, then sat down on a step and pulled them on, lacing each one to the top. "Maybe by the time we get home, Pa will be asleep and won't remember what happened. One good thing- when Pa wasn't looking, I picked up one of the nickels off the floor. Plus I still got one of Pa's. So we got a start."

This had happened before so Charlie wasn't without a plan. First they walked to the corner market where he bought his sister an apple with one of their nickels. Then he led her to a doorway out of the April wind. Biting off the pieces of apple, he handed them to her one at a time. *It would sure help if she didn't cry so much*, he thought.



With her fourth bite in her mouth, she mumbled, "You can have one too."

"That's all right. I'll get something once we find more papers to sell."

Sarah was too hungry to argue. "Charlie, Poppa was talking with Momma about denturing me. What's that mean?"

His eyes swung around and he glared at Sarah, shocked. "Are you sure?"

She nodded her head. "I'm sure that's what he said, but I don't know what it meant."

"It's supposed to be indenturing. And it ain't good, that's for sure. It means kind of like he would rent you to someone for a while, like a year. You'd have to do whatever the person wants you to do and wouldn't get no pay for it neither."

"If I done that, Poppa wouldn't be around to hit me no more, would he?"

"He wouldn't, but you don't know who else would. They'd already pay Pa for your work so they'd expect you to be kind of like a slave."

"Then I don't think I want to be indentured."

"Huh. I'm sure you wouldn't. But you may not have no choice. I guess we're lucky you haven't had to work in a factory yet. A lot of seven year olds do. I'm sure Pa would have indentured me a long time ago if I didn't make regular money selling papers."

"If Poppa dentures me, and they was mean, I'd just run away."

"Huh," he laughed again. "Run away to where? Anyways, I'd better get selling papers, or Pa might do this to me too," he said, pointing to the welt on Sarah's left cheek. She reached up and hid it with her hand.

When the apple was finished, they walked two blocks until Charlie arrived at a newsstand. "Hi, Mike," Charlie greeted. "Can I sell papers for you on the street?"

"Not today, Charlie," the man answered. "With the British ship sinking, they're selling like hot cakes without any help. In fact, I need to find some more."

"All right. Thanks anyways." He started to walk away but turned back. "We could sell something else. How about pencils or apples?"

"I guess you could do that. Here," he said, handing Sarah a can of pencils and Charlie a small bowl of apples.

The two children walked a half block down and stood opposite of each other holding out their container and inviting people to buy something. A half hour later, they returned with an empty apple bowl, and half as many pencils. "I guess apples sold better than pencils," Charlie said. "Here's the money."

"Ha," he laughed. "The only way your sister's gonna sell anything is if we put a bag over her head. Course, sometimes people feel sorry for someone who looks like that. So, here's your pay." He handed Charlie a nickel. "See you tomorrow maybe. Oh, and here's a nickel for you, Sister. Maybe you could buy a dolly or something."

"Thanks, Mister!" She took the coin and clutched it in her tiny hand. As the man returned to his stand, the two walked down the street.

"Good goin', Sarah. Give it here. Maybe we can buy some bread for supper with it and the nickel I got."

She shook her head. "It's for a dolly."

"But wouldn't you want something to eat instead?" She shook her head again.

He held out his hand. "If you're going to work with me, you got to put all the money in one pot. Come on. We need food more than a stupid doll, anyways."



She stuck out of lip, then slapped the coin into his hand. Charlie examined it, then slipped it into his right pocket. "My left pocket is for Pa, but my right pocket is for us. He don't need to know what's in there, right?"

"How come he said I'd do better with a bag on my head?" Sarah whined, ignoring his question.

"It was just a joke. Just forget it."

"It wasn't a joke. Everyone makes fun of me just because I have a red mark here," she said, putting her finger on her right cheek.

"It's more than that. It's what you got here," he explained, touching her left cheek again. "It makes your face look lopsided, that's all. I don't know why that never healed like the other places. The scar on your arm is kind of ugly too. It didn't heal too good neither, that's for sure. I wish you could keep your sleeve over it more. Plus, I know we'd both look better if we could get cleaned up a little."

She pulled her sleeve down as far as it would go. "But I can't help it that I got burned. Why do people-"

"I know. We've talk about this lots of times before. Like I said, just don't listen to them."

The two walked a couple of blocks to the next newsstand. "Hi, Herald," Charlie greeted. "Want some help selling papers?"

"I'm doing pretty good without it, but, sure, take a few and go down to the next corner."

Sarah followed Charlie to the corner where he ordered, "You stand over by the building, uh, out of the wind. I'll be done soon and then we can buy some bread with one of our nickels." Sarah huddled in a doorway as Charlie lifted the first paper and started his speech about the Titanic sinking.

"Hey, this is my corner," another older boy declared, walking up to him. "Find your own."

"Who said you own a corner," Charlie defended.

"Cause I was here first, that's why. Now beat it."

Sarah jumped up and walked over. "We'll help you sell your papers if you help us sell ours."

The boy was surprised. "Well, all right, as long as we sell mine first." The two boys faced opposite directions and each held up a paper.

All their papers were sold in five minutes. Then the boy

turned to Charlie, holding out his hand. "Thanks," he said.

"Thanks to you," Charlie returned. "Do you live around here?"

"Sometimes. I live wherever I can find an alley or a trash pile. I used to live at the orphanage, but they treated me so bad, I ran away."

"Really? Are you an orphan then?"

"I'm pretty sure I am. Least no one wants to take care of me. So I take care of myself. So what's your name?"

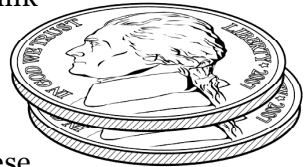
"Charlie. Charlie Whitneck. And this is my sister Sarah."

"Hi. I'm Kip. Kip Whitmer." Sarah held out her hand, but Kip didn't seem to notice. "I used to have a sister too, but I don't know what happened to her. She might still be at the orphanage, or they might have killed her by now."

"They kill kids there?" Charlie asked, wide-eyed.

"Not on purpose exactly. But if they don't like you, then they don't feed you and pretty soon you're dead. Some of the kids, at least the boys, just disappear and no one knows what happens to them. But I don't know why they wouldn't like Mary 'cause she's pretty when she washes her hair, and she usually behaves the way she's supposed to."

"I thought we had it bad, but I think you've got more trouble than we do," Charlie said. He stuck his hand into his right pocket and felt their two nickels. Removing them, he held them out to Kip. "Here. I think you need these more than we do. Just don't let my pa know I gave them to you."



"Wow! Thanks! I won't forget this. See ya."

When Kip was gone, Charlie turned to Sarah. "Sorry about giving away your doll money and our bread money, but at least we can go home after Pa is asleep and get something to eat there. That's more than Kip can do."

"I'm not sorry. He needed it more than I need a dolly."

"I thought you'd feel that way."

Charlie still had his pa's money in his left pocket. He looked at the clock on the opposite corner. They would need to kill some time until they were sure their Pa was asleep. He pulled out fifteen cents, mostly in pennies, from his left pocket. "We've got to keep these as seed coins," he said to Sarah. "We

can't spend them no way because we got to buy more papers with them tomorrow." She nodded like she had heard that before. "Well, come on. Let's walk the long way home."

The two moseyed slowly around the large block, ending up several buildings from their apartment entrance. "We can wait here, but I think it's still too early to go into the house." Charlie glanced down the street and saw a commotion in the area of their entrance. *That looks interesting*, he thought. A crowd had gathered and lined the sidewalk from their entrance to the road. He could see the heads of some men moving through the crowd to a wagon in front. Soon it disappeared past them and the crowd dispersed.

"What was it?" Sarah asked.

"I don't know. Maybe someone was sick and they was taking him to a hospital," Charlie guessed.

"I'm tired," Sarah whined. "Can't we go home now?"

"It's still early, like I said, . . . but I guess it wouldn't hurt to try. Maybe just to be safe, you wait at the bottom of the stairs. If the coast is clear, I'm come get you. But if you hear the usual shoutin', and hittin', then stay there until I call you. You got that?" She nodded without answering.

They walked softly up the outside steps and through the front door. Sarah hunkered in the corner under the stairs out of sight. Charlie glanced at the steps. The first three had fresh blood on them. He checked his hands for any unknown wounds, then told Sarah to hold out her hands. It wasn't from them at least. Maybe it had something to do with the commotion they had seen.

Charlie turned to ascend when Sarah said, "Look, Charlie. I found two nickels. Now I can buy a dolly after all."

He was about to tell her to fork them over but then realized they would surely lose them both if his pa searched him. "OK, you can keep them for your dolly. Now stay hid until I tell you the coast is clear."