

JUST AFTER DARK

by

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## PROLOGUE

**LONDON, 1861**

IN A RUSH Little Charlie worked his broom ahead of the distinguished gentleman, and lady in the hooped skirt. "Watch your step there, missus. That ain't mud, you know, and I'd be right displeased if you was to get any of it on your lovely hem!"

Without a word the lady continued her stroll abreast of the gentleman, her chin lifted high, a kerchief held at her nose. Charlie wasn't expecting any words from the lady, nor the gentleman. No person of means ever did say nothin' to him. Not unless it was to scold him for missing a patty. But whether a silence or a scolding, it was all the same to Charlie, so long as they paid him an earned penny.

"I should like to see these heaps removed at once," the gentleman told his lovely companion. He was indicating in the distance the great mounds of earth and mud that lined Marylebone

Road. For weeks now, the piles had been growing greater in number and more distant along the road. Charlie hadn't wandered as far as King's Cross, but that's where the piles ended, or so said some of the other sweepers. So, too, had they told him that city men were planning to run a train under the carriageway. But it being such a fanciful idea, Charlie hadn't believed them at first, had thought the story a lark. Since then, he'd overheard similar musings from customers of substance, making it clear the story had been no lie.

When the gentleman and lady reached the footpath, Charlie straightened himself and held out an open palm, praying for a penny. It was not certain he would be given one, it never was, but with a fine brooming and a broad smile he hoped to find the gentleman's favor. "Chore complete, sir. And not so much as a spot of dung on the missus' hem."

The distinguished couple turned and continued their stroll along the thoroughfare, the gentleman's hands never once straying anywhere near his pockets.

Charlie frowned as he watched the two disappear into a gathering fog. The air grew colder. Nearby, a gas-lamp hissed and horses clacked over the cobblestone. Charlie turned up the collar of his tattered coat, then spotted a wedge of yellow light appear and disappear when the door to a nearby public house opened and closed. From it walked a plump gentleman in a frock coat. His face was round and jovial, and Charlie was sure he would be a payin' customer.

Hurriedly, Charlie scampered kitty-corner to the pavement where the gentleman stood collecting his bearing, presumably deciding which direction to proceed. Charlie watched him snug on a top hat, waver slightly, and steady himself against his cane. His nose wrinkled in disagreement as he took in a lungful of London air and stepped out onto the sooty cobblestone.

“Evening, sir,” Charlie proclaimed. “Allow me to service a path for you?” He didn’t wait for a reply. He simply began whistling and sweeping a clean swathe of pavement.

“Sweep a path?” Eddie’s voice suddenly sounded. “With them twigs you call arms, Little Charlie?” Eddie was quickly beside him, having spotted the same fine customer. “I hardly think you can manage it. I’m sure this gentleman would rather a proper broomin’.”

Charlie felt heat rush to his face. Eddie, or Evil E as the other boys liked to call him, was pushin’ in on his territory. “This ain’t your corner,” Charlie protested. “You ain’t got no right to butt in.”

“And what’re you gonna do about it?” Eddie taunted.

The gentleman paused in the road to allow a carriage to speed past.

Eddie, who was an older, bigger, much uglier boy, eyed Charlie, daring him to do something about it. He grinned with blackened teeth.

“But it was I who offered my services first,” Charlie said. “Wasn’t I the one, sir?”

The gentleman resumed crossing, and the boys resumed sweeping. The gentleman gaped at

the pair and let out a hearty chuckle. "It would seem we've a contest between scoundrels."

Charlie stopped. "But I'm not a scoundrel, sir. I work for an honest wage."

"Your opponent is besting you," the gentleman said. "You concede too easily, I fear."

But Charlie wasn't gonna give up. He swallowed the insult and resumed his sweeping, racing ahead of the gentleman and working with long, furious strokes.

Eddie slipped a boot behind him, and Charlie toppled to the cobblestone, scraping his elbows through holes in his frayed coat sleeves.

The gentleman laughed again and said, "The bigger scoundrel has gotten the better of you, little waif!"

A hansom roared past. Charlie scrambled away, narrowly avoiding the horse's pounding hooves. He jumped to his feet and raced to the footpath, where Eddie was extending a palm, already awaiting the gentleman's penny. Charlie swung his broomstick and cracked it solidly against Eddie's wrist, making him pull away his hand and howl in pain.

"It was I who earned it, sir," Charlie said reaching out his own hand, and was suddenly grappled from behind when Eddie rushed him, and the two toppled onto the cold, damp pavement.

The scuffle had started badly for Charlie, and he could feel the weight of Eddie atop him, when the gentleman once again roared in laughter. "Forget the penny. I've a shilling for the scoundrel who collects it first!"

And the weight was lifted. Charlie could see Eddie up on his feet sprinting for the gentleman, could feel a trickle of warm blood running from his nose. He sprang onto his own feet and hurried behind.

Shrouded by a thin fog, the gentlemen had begun fishing into his waistcoat pocket, and from there he plucked out a silver coin.

*A shilling.*

A whole shilling! Charlie's heartbeat raced. He looked to Eddie, who was much closer to the gentleman. It was he who would claim the prize first!

Charlie bound forward and had gained the footpath ten feet behind Eddie, when the gentleman stunned them both.

"It won't be so easy, you little scoundrels. You'll have to work for the pittance." And, his expression no longer jovial, he tossed the coin high into the misty air. It flashed briefly from the light of a nearby gas-lamp before disappearing over the many heaps of earth that lined Marylebone Road.

It became a race.

Charlie sprang first, but Eddie passed him with longer strides. The gentleman's laughter faded as he continued toward his destination.

When Charlie reached the earthen mounds he stopped. His eyes searched the darkness beyond. The mounds shielded the light from the streetlamps, but Charlie knew exactly what lay before him. The clatter of horses and the rumble of carriages seemed to fade into silence as Charlie looked with apprehension.

In the daylight the great trench was menacing enough. Many times Charlie had stood before it gaping downward, watching the workmen toil about, hammers pounding and saws grinding, working feverishly to shore up the sides. Dug to a depth of sixty feet, the trench stretched the impossible length of four miles, from Paddington to King's Cross.

But now only a cold silence came from the hole. "Best we put off searching till the morrow," Charlie told Eddie, who had come up beside him to marvel at the darkened void.

"And risk you sneaking down in the night and stealing away me profit? Oh no, Little Charlie, the shilling's mine."

Charlie had no intention of climbing down in the darkness, and after honest figuring he decided he didn't want Eddie doing it neither. The reason for this wasn't a selfish one. Sure, he hated Eddie. He hated the bully just as all the other boys hated him, but hating Eddie and wishing him harm was two different things, and Charlie shivered at the thought of him trying to climb down and slipping on the dampened earth, falling to his end.

"Pray, wait till the morning, Eddie. We'll search together in the daylight, split the shilling even-stevens between us."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? Swipe half of me profit. Well, it won't do. I intend to find that coin, and I intend to find it this very moment." His head turned side to side as he searched for a means to descend the trench.

Charlie found himself in a fix. Do nothin' till morning and be out a shilling if Eddie were to find it tonight. Go after it himself and, well...the thought of what might happen to him made him tremble.

Eddie had walked to a section of trench Charlie knew had been shored to the top with beams and wooden planks. He nestled his arse into the mud, kicked out his legs over the edge, and swung himself around using his feet to find purchase on one of the planks. A smile revealed his rotten teeth—and that he'd found a foothold. Slowly he descended.

Charlie rushed to where he had climbed over and peered down into the darkness. Eddie's ugly face was all that was visible, and soon even that dissolved into black.

"You'll never find a shilling in the dark," Charlie called down. It was a plea for Eddie to return as much as it was the truth.

"Is that so?" came the disembodied reply. "Well, I was mudlarking before I was sweeping. Me and me buddies used to scavenge in the river muck for lumps of coal and bits of rope and such. Once, I found a penny under a foot of shore slime. If I could find a penny in that stink, I sure can find a shilling in the dark." The voice had become distant, indicating Eddie was nearing the bottom.

"So there's no talkin' you out of it?"

When Eddie finally answered again, his voice was below Charlie to his right, not below straight down. This told Charlie Eddie had reached the bottom and was now making his



way back to where the coin must've pitched over the side. "Course there's no talking me out of a shilling. You heard the gentleman, it's a contest. First one of us to snatch it keeps it."

Charlie closed his eyes and breathed deeply. The air smelled of manure and horse piss, as it always did. But tonight, with the air heavier, the smell was tenfold worse. Charlie imagined the shilling. He wanted that shilling. By rights it was his. And since Eddie had no intention of waiting for the sun and splitting the good fortune, Charlie knew he had no choice but to go down after it.

He had just begun to mimic Eddie's path down into the trench when a thought occurred to him. A clever thought. Charlie smiled, knowing it would give him an edge that Eddie couldn't match. He stood and reached into a trouser pocket, pulled from it the soiled kerchief in which he folded his earnings, and ran back to the pavement, where he smoothed down his hair and stepped inside Sainsbury's, a penny held prominently in front of him, so as to announce to the shopkeeper he was a respectable customer, not a common beggar or thief.

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THE BOARDS WERE scratchy against Charlie's calloused palms as he descended, and when at last his feet hit solid ground, if an inch or two of mud could be called such, he let out a sigh of relief and prepared himself for what was sure to be a messy chore.

In the darkness he could hear Eddie sifting through the slop, grunting and cursing the whole while.

Before returning, Charlie had counted the number of paces from where he estimated the shilling dropped to where he had climbed down. He now counted off the same number of paces back, holding his hands out to prevent a bump in the night.

In the darkness Eddie spoke, "So you found the nerve to give it a go, eh, Little Charlie?"

"And why not? It's my shilling, by rights. Dutifully earned."

"Well, we won't find it mucking around without light, I'm afraid. You was right sayin' it was best to wait till the morn."

By the sound of Eddie's voice, Charlie figured him to be fifteen or twenty feet to his left. "Go back up, then," Charlie said. "I won't miss you any."

"And let you steal me shilling? I think not."

Charlie removed his newly bought goods from a trouser pocket, then fumbled with a matchstick before scratching it across a tiny box. The stick flared red and faded yellow. Charlie touched the flame to a candlewick, producing a halo of soft light. He blew out the match and inhaled the sharp smoke, a much finer smell than was the air in the trench.

"Well I'll be," came Eddie's voice. Charlie turned to see him kneeling in a thick fog, muck covering his hands, arms, and face. He blinked

against the light. "Well aren't you the smart one? Be a proper bloke and bring me that candle."

"I'll not divvy any of it," Charlie said. "Was I who had the idea. Stay away from me, and stay away from my light."

Eddie never liked being told what to do, and he proved it again when he stood and stomped over to Charlie. In the yellow glow Charlie could see him snarling, dirty teeth and narrow, rat-like eyes.

"I'm warning you," Charlie said boldly. "It ain't your light. Search elsewhere and leave me be."

"Careful with your warnings there, Charlie." Eddie leaned his ugly face in close, so much so that Charlie could smell his rotten breath. "There ain't no peelers down here to help you."

Charlie shrank back.

Eddie smiled, knowing he'd scared him enough, then snatched the candle from Charlie's grasp, lifted it, and turned to have a look about.

Though his body trembled with fear and loathing, Charlie too couldn't help but gape at the surroundings as flickering candlelight revealed a nightmarish display of fog-shrouded forms. Some were large, some were small. The fog had settled so thick in the trench that none were distinct enough to identify for sure, but Charlie assumed most were stacks of planks or piles of timbers. His fear of Eddie gave way to a deep sense of foreboding as he stared helplessly about. And for the moment he actually felt relieved to have the bigger boy's company.

“Well ain’t this someplace out of Bedlam,” Eddie said, searching about. “Best I find me shilling and quit this hole quick.”

From the far side of the trench, scratching alerted Charlie. *Must’ve been a rat*, he thought. *Impossible to be somethin’ else.*

Nothin’ about being here was pleasing Charlie, who was just about to do as Eddie said and quit this hole when the candlelight revealed a silver glint from the mud. Eddie must’ve seen it too, for in a frenzy he sprinted to the middle of the trench, his boots making sucking sounds as he ran.

Charlie hurried behind him, and when he reached Eddie he could see the shilling already glinting between the boy’s grubby fingers. Charlie’s heart sank.

The gentleman’s toss had landed the treasure all the way here in the middle. And it was Eddie who snatched it first!

“Now this was dutifully earned,” Eddie said, mocking Charlie’s earlier words.

“You know that shilling belongs to me, Eddie. It wouldn’t be fair of you to keep it.”

But Eddie wasn’t listening. He had spotted something more against the far wall of the trench and was already beating feet before Charlie could make his case.

Eddie stopped before the earthen wall, he and the halo of candlelight framed by massive beams of shoring. “Well, would you put your eyes on this,” Eddie said, peering down at a darkened heap. “These should fetch a pretty

penny at the market." He knelt and began digging around.

The ringing of irons told Charlie he'd found a workman's tool bag. "It ain't ours, you know. Swipin' it wouldn't be respectable. Do that and we're the scoundrels the gentleman said we were."

"First the shilling, and now these." Eddie straightened and turned to Charlie, grinning. "I sure do like your territory, Little Charlie. Think I'll make it mine." His eyes narrowed; his smile vanished. "For good."

There came another scratching. This time clear enough for Charlie to pinpoint the source as being the wall behind Eddie.

Eddie turned and held up the guttering candle. Its yellow light flickered, revealing a gaping breach in the earth between beams of shoring. And from it the scratching grew louder and longer, startling Eddie back a step. He turned to Charlie. "I think somethin's in there."

"Let's get back to sweeping, Eddie," Charlie pleaded. "There're pennies to be earned up top. It ain't right for us to be down here. You can keep the shilling, and I won't even say nothing 'bout the tools, neither. Come on, let's hurry."

But before Eddie could move, something happened, something came from the breach, something so wickedly quick Charlie couldn't be sure what he was seeing.

In an instant Eddie was pulled from his feet and disappeared into the gaping void. A short, muffled scream was his only cry. Then came sounds not from Eddie. They couldn't have

been from Eddie—Eddie never snarled or slavered or gibbered. Then Charlie heard something horrible, like flesh tearing. He felt weak in the knees and for a moment, before his legs carried him racing and climbing from the trench, he was certain he'd seen somethin' dreadful, tiny things gleaming from the darkness.

Countless eyes.

Cold, hungry eyes.