

Charles was making dreadfully slow progress as he moved down the street, heading for what he and his younger sister, Abby, called home, an abandoned storeroom at the back of an equally abandoned butcher shop. Crude and unheated, it was marginally better than being out in the open. The wind howled mercilessly, seemingly trying to keep him from reaching his destination.

While he was lumbering forward, his face lowered to shield it from the wind, an excruciating pain exploded in his upper back between his shoulders. Without warning, a second pain followed the first, causing him to nearly fall. He caught himself at the last moment, but his right knee landed on a sharp-edged piece of cobblestone, causing him more than a little pain. He cried out from the pain but in anger as well and over his cry he heard a thunderous voice shout, “Stand aside! You blight on humanity! Respectable individuals ought to traverse these thoroughfares without enduring encounters with the wretched, ailment-ridden urchins such as yourself!”

Charles looked back to find a large man with red hair standing before him. His beard was full and neatly trimmed and it was easy to see that his clothing was expensive. His woolen cloak, complete with cape, was a rich, dark shade of gray. It also appeared to be nearly new, as did the crisp black hat that sat on the man’s head. Highly polished, black shoes with huge silver buckles were visible from under black gators extending to just above the man’s knees. He wore smartly creased, light gray, wool breeches, a black waist coat, and a white shirt. In his hand was a sturdy looking, shiny green cane whose head appeared to be gold, covered with some kind of carving. However, the most impressive thing about the cane was the fact that the man was evidently getting ready to use it on Charles again.

“Proper folks ain’t in the habit of sneakily shoving others from the rear, now, are they?” Charles shouted back at his attacker as he stood and backed away, favoring his knee as he did so.