

SNATCH

The Adventures
of David and Me
in Old New York

Volume 1

A Novella

Charles Fuller

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CHAPTER ONE

September 4, 1838.

MY FLOAT WAS BOBBING UP and down in the Hudson River like something was trying to pull it under. I grabbed my fishing pole, thinking I had snared, at the very least, a three or four pound striped bass. Sadly, all that was on my hook was a dirty canvas bag partially covered in mud. Small and soaked clear through, it was a gray thing, with a leather drawstring around the top of it.

“What is it?” David reached for it.

I yanked it away and opened it. 'Course, David grumbled—he always grumbles. The first law of fishing is you get first dibs at whatever winds up on *your hook*. Inside the bag was a leather belt with the initials B.C. cut in the tip, and a folded piece of paper with what looked like the word, *Alabam* scribbled on it. I hadn't paid much attention to the outside of the bag. When I

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scraped away the mud I realized there was a faded image of a skull on one side. A skull with horns on both sides of its forehead and a smile that made it seem as though it was about to speak. I had seen the smiling skull's head before, drawn in chalk on the front door of a burned-out house on Little Water Street. It was the sign of the 'New York Kidnapping Club',¹ a notorious group of men and a few women, white and black, led by the mysterious Snatch, who helped agents return 'fugitive slaves', run-aways or unsuspecting freemen caught on the streets of New York, to the slave states of the South.²

"What does that mean?" David pointed to the skull.

"Something awful," I said. Seeing that image made me shudder. As far as I was concerned it was time to head home. The sun was setting over New Jersey anyway, and the low slung clouds fanning its final red-orange rays signaled that time of day when dusk could easily turn to danger.

Just as I was about to pick up my pole, I saw him out the corner of my eye. A tall, young, black seaman, cast a long angular shadow on the wall of the warehouse as he moved behind a row of empty barrels. I almost missed him. When I opened the water-logged bag, my left hand started itching, a sure sign something unexpected would happen. I was ready to run, but David had seen him too. *Curious* is the best word to describe my ten-year-old brother. With no regard for the fourth bluegill he had just caught, his line, or pole, David began walking in the man's direction.

"Where are you goin'?"

“He could be hurt Charlie, I think he fell down!”

The man seemed to slide down the wall, more than fall. He was breathing heavily when David reached him.

“What’s the matta’, Sir?”

David was always polite. Me? I was remembering that Snatch was said to be a master of disguise who loved grabbing gullible children. If it was Snatch, he was bound to get one of us—and I could always out-run David! Though the consequence of arriving home without him, while not as horrific as being sold into slavery, could well leave scars I’d remember for a lifetime. Our dad would kill me.

“Do you need help?”

“I need to rest,” the Man said. “Then you can tell me where I might find lodging.”

He was either Snatch or the dumbest sailor I’d ever seen. Lodgings? In Five Points?

“Try Pete Williams’ dive,” I snapped, stepping forward, shielding David. “It’s called Almacks and it’s on Orange Street.”³

“How do I get there?”

“I’ll point the way,” I said, for some reason less afraid than before.

“What ship you off, Mister?” It was David again.

The sailor coughed and stuttered. “The SS Jerry Mullens!”

“Never heard of that ship,” David went on, “and you don’t look like a sailor to me!”

He looked like one to me. He was twenty-four or so, rucksack over his shoulder, bandana tied around his

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neck—yet frankly, I half-expected in the next second, to hear Snatch’s terrifying whistle, feel the slimy burlap sack pulled over my head and find David and me the following morning chained in a boat headed south. I coulda’ punched David! Surprisingly, the man just trembled—in fact he was trembling more than I was!

“I’m not a sailor,” he said.

“What are you?” David continued.

“A cook’s mate!”

David looked at me with his, *I-don’t-believe-him* expression. For my part, I didn’t care what the man was.

“It’s getting’ dark, David,” I said.

“When you get to Orange Street, you’d better watch your money!” David informed him.

“Oh, I only have a few coppers,” said the man.

“One penny is a lot in some places in Five Points,” I added.

“Is that where I am—Five Points?”

“Yep,” I nodded. “And we better get going.”

Am I soft-hearted? Not normally, but maybe it was the way he was trembling in front of two scrawny kids like us. I lifted my pole and hitched the bag to my belt. The cook’s mate stood up slowly. He was a lot taller than I thought—and muscular.

“What’s your name?” David again.

“Johnson—Freddie Johnson—what’s yours?”

We told him. I knew Freddie Johnson wasn’t his real name though. He hadn’t said it with any confidence—like he had been using it all his life.

“I really appreciate the help,” he said. “What’s that on the bag?”

I told him what I thought it was, and if he saw that smiling skull again—anywhere, to leave where he was at once. David winked at me, and we started towards home and Pete Williams’ gin mill.

“Thanks again. I’ll repay you both, I promise.”

Yeah, I thought. This is the last we’ll see of you!

It didn’t take us long to reach Leonard Street—a block away from home and Pete Williams’ place.

“Which way is it?”

David pointed. I told him to turn right at the next corner, and Freddie started away. He wasn’t half-way down the block when David whispered: “Let’s follow him.”

“Why?”

“I think he’s a fugitive slave!”

“So what? I know he is!”

“How do you know?”

“Freddie Johnson’s not his real name,” I said, “and who else goes around changing their names but fugitives?”

“Let’s follow him then—just suppose he gets into trouble?”

“So? What can *we* do?”

David shrugged. “Don’t know. Daddy said, *when-ever or wherever you can, help a fugitive*, remember?”

I remembered, dog-gone-it! I wanted to pop him one, though. David started behind Freddie forgetting

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his bluegills and pole, so I grabbed them—and yep, I followed too. I guess I might as well tell you, David’s the brave one. Me? You guessed it—scared to death!



Sometimes a tale is as close to the truth as you can get. There is no way I can prove that what I’m about to tell you actually happened September 4th, 5th and during the weeks before my birthday. Largely, because the people who were involved in the events I’m about to reveal vowed never to tell anyone, for fear of getting their friends in trouble with the laws of New York State. ’Course, you can go to the *New York Times*, or *The Sun* to find the name of this or that person connected with these goings on, just to confirm they really existed, and that I’m not lying about a particular saloon or street. You can prove David and me are real, ’cause our father Robert Little, a member of the New York Committee of Vigilance, wrote his name at the bottom of a secret list of *conductors* on the Underground Railroad in 1837, adding our mother, Alice, and our names as next of kin. That is, if you can find that secret list. But even having done all that, none of the aforementioned suggestions would list the events as they happened or provide you with a clear picture! So, I guess you’ll have to take my word for what I’m about to tell you.

David and me live in Five Points—a part of lower Manhattan. I have never been able to figure out why people continue to call it that—even though I know five

streets—Cross Street, Anthony Street, Orange Street, Mulberry Street and Little Water Street intersect in the center of the neighborhood. It seemed to me that Five Points should have something to do with stars, night skies, and peace. Our mother told us that before she was born, the neighborhood was once the hub of aristocratic New York where a lake called the Collect was a place people came to picnic or fish.⁴

I don't mind saying, it takes a lot of imagination to see our streets flooded, with ladies in carriages or gentlemen gallantly removing their capes so ladies can sit down and picnic. Five Points is said to be one of the worst slums in the United States! Savage! Violent! Bloody! And, if you don't believe it, the New York newspapers dare you to come down here at night *by yourself* and get back to wherever you came from, without scratch or broken limb!

You see, Five Points is *the* principal stop on the Underground Railroad in New York. I guess people who know that and think slavery's right, would naturally say this part of town is bad—what with all them fugitive slaves and free black men runnin' around. 'Course they're not entirely wrong! I've seen women fights, knife fights and dog fights! 'Seen a nameless fugitive chased by slave catchers until the pathetic man's legs gave way and sent him tumbling toward my Dad who, unable to help, watched silently as the Watchmen dragged him off.⁵

One night last winter, the wind blowing off the Hudson was so cold, it didn't even seem like wind. It felt more like chunks of a gale you could grab and

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throw in wide, howling pieces, if you didn't freeze in the process. I had crawled out of bed, real quiet-like, in the deepest part of night, tip-toeing to the window, trying not to make a sound. When I raised the canvas to peep out on the alley below and Little Water street—you guessed it—David shoved his elbow into my side so hard I nearly shouted.

“What you lookin’ at, Charlie?”

“What are you doin’ out of bed, David?”

“You woke me up!”

“I did n—!”

I saw them in that instant. A group of huddled black figures inching their way along the sidewalk until they reached a door. It opened suddenly. Swallowed them instantly. Then slammed shut so quickly I wasn't sure I'd even seen them. Several minutes after, the clatter of horses enlivened the street. Our mother came into the room while the Sheriff, two or three Watchmen and four slave catchers' rode up and down Little Water Street, yelling about fugitive slaves, banging on doors and waking people up. My dad, David and me were born free black men. Our mother had been a slave in Delaware, and a fugitive in New York. Whenever we were careless, she'd sit us down and tell us about slavery and what her life was like before she married Dad. But that's another story, and I don't wanna' tell somethin' else—this tale is gruesome enough! Anyway, we live half-way up Little Water Street at #19, on the second floor in two rooms. The Irishmen call our section *Staggtown*.⁶ They live all around us on Anthony,

Mulberry, Leonard, Cross and Orange streets. Now on parts of Cross Street, near Pearl and Centre Street—the people seem to be from everywhere else in Europe and speak strange languages and wear strange clothes. About the only thing people in Five Points have in common is poverty. My dad says: “Charles, when you git this many poor people togetha’ nature just *makes* a slum, like the puddles after rain—wouldn’t matta’ where you dropped ’em!” Dad is something of a sage, I guess. But there aren’t many situations in Five Points nowadays that call for a sage, so he’s a chimney-sweep.⁷

At times, durin’ the summer, when he has lots of work, David and me—we’ll go up to the Bowery and watch him climb three, maybe four stories into the sky! I’m going to start this story in a second—just want you to feel like you’re here in Five Points with me.

Now, if you walk south down Little Water Street, you’ll come to Paradise Square. My bet is, you’d smell it, long before you get there! I useta’ tell David it had the stink of dead rats mixed with the aroma of strawberries. It isn’t really a square at all—more a loose triangle, surrounded on all sides by dark, worn-out buildings that jut into the gray cobblestone streets. Most of them were old warehouses or sheds. Now, people live in them—or I should say, *try* to live in them. Inside, the warehouses are so crowded, tenants build scaffolds and lay wooden planks every eight feet, living on top of each other in tiny personal spaces, each guarded, on every level by angry barking dogs—dogs, once brought into a tenants layer and never allowed to leave. Oh, some