

Jane Horneshaew

THE HARLIE CHAPLIN STORY



Collins English Library

Series editors: K R Cripwell and Lewis Jones

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Collins English Library Level 2

THE CHARLIE CHAPLIN STORY

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Chapter One

The dancer finished her dance and began to sing. She had a sweet voice, but it wasn't very strong.

"Louder!" screamed the soldiers. "Sing louder!" The woman tried, but she couldn't. The soldiers began to laugh at her, and the woman stopped singing and started to cry.

Her five-year-old son stood a few metres from her. He wanted to help his mother, but he didn't know how. Suddenly a thought came to him. He jumped up beside her on the stage and called out: "I'll sing for you!"

The soldiers looked at the small child in front of them and laughed. But one soldier said: "Let him try. Let's listen to him."

The boy sang the song of Jack Jones, a London street-market seller. As he sang, he danced round the stage.

The soldiers loved it. They dropped money down on the stage. When the boy saw the money, he stopped singing and reached down for it.

"Sing!" the soldiers screamed.

"First I'll get the money, then I'll sing again," the boy called back. The soldiers laughed and more money rained down on the stage.

That night, the little boy and his mother took back to their home in Lambeth, South London, a

lot of money. His mother never went on the stage again. But, in later years, Charlie Chaplin became a great star.

Chapter Two

"I'm not going to wear them!" Charlie eyed the red trousers in his mother's hands. "They're worse than Sydney's yellow shirt—and all the boys at school laughed at that!"

"You're right," said Sydney, Charlie's older brother.

"But you don't have any other trousers," cried his mother. "I made these with cloth from one of my old stage dresses. I worked on them all night."

"Why can't you buy me trousers in a shop?" said Charlie.

"You know why," said his mother. "We've no money." Now her days as a dancer and singer were over, and Hannah Chaplin's little family were very poor. Hannah tried to make dresses and sell them, but her eyes weren't very strong.

"Can't you ask Father?" said Sydney.

"I haven't seen your father for months," said Hannah. "He spends all his money on that woman. She lives with him now ... she and their child. If he doesn't spend his money on her, he spends it on drink. I don't see any of it."

"Sydney sells newspapers in the street," said Charlie. "But I'm only seven. What can I do to get some money?" He eyed the red trousers again.

He couldn't go to school in those. They were the trousers of ... of a dancer ...

"I know!" he said. "I'll go and sing and dance on the streets. Sydney will come with me, won't you, Sydney?"

"Of course," said Sydney. "And I'll wear my yellow shirt."

The boys often danced and sang on the streets of Lambeth after that, but they didn't make much money. They brought their pennies home to their mother. The pennies helped to buy a little food.

Hannah's eyes became worse. She couldn't see to cut the cloth for any more dresses. There was no food in the house at all.

People came from the Lambeth Town Office and took the boys away from her. They placed them in the Hanwell Schools for Poor Children. They put Charlie in one school and Sydney in another.

Charlie was very unhappy without his mother and brother. The teachers cut off his hair and the food was bad.

For a time, Hannah's eyes became better and the boys went home again. A clothes factory gave her cloth to make into dresses, so she could work at

home. But after a time, she became sick and the doctors put her into hospital.

Sydney and Charlie went to live with their father and his other woman, Louise.

Louise wasn't happy about this. She didn't want the children of another woman in her house.

Their father was often away from home. He was a singer—but no famous theatre wanted him; he drank too much. Louise drank too. When she drank, she forgot about the children of 'that other woman.'

One night, eight-year-old Charlie came home and found the house empty. He couldn't get in, so he walked the streets for hours. At midnight, Louise came back, but she wouldn't let him in through the door.

When their father heard about it, he had a fight with Louise. But after that, things became worse for the boys. Louise often shut them out of the house.

As Charlie walked through London at night, he learned a lot about the poor people who lived and slept on the streets.

He never forgot these things.

After a while, Hannah came out of hospital. She found a room, and the clothes factory gave her

work again. The boys came back to her and her husband gave her fifty pence a week.

One day Hannah saw an old man on the street. "Look at that old man, Charlie," she said. "His back is like the letter C. His eyes are on the road. When he walks, his feet never leave the ground. He walks like this ..."

Hannah got up from her chair and walked across the room. For a minute or two, she acted like the old man. She *was* the old man.

"Now you try," she told Charlie. Charlie tried it and found that he could act like the old man too.

Another day Hannah said: "Act like that cat, Charlie." Another day, it was a woman with a heavy bag.

One day, Charlie walked into the room and said: "Who am I?"

Hannah eyed him for a minute, then laughed. "That's easy," she said. "You're a young woman in love. You know, Charlie, you're a very good actor. I think you're ready to go on the stage."

Charlie became one of eight boys in *Eight Lancashire Lads*. They danced in theatres all over England. He got twelve and a half pence a week. But after a year, the job ended and Charlie went back home.

Chapter Three

The train came in and Sydney was on it. Charlie ran up to him.

"You're like a stranger in your seaman's clothes," Charlie told his brother. "Six months is a long time."

"You're right," said Sydney. He looked at his younger brother—the boy was dirty and his clothes were old and too big.

"How old are you now?" Sydney asked. "Eleven? You don't grow very fast. Why isn't mother here?"

"I've got something to tell you," said Charlie.

"All right," said Sydney. "There's a restaurant here. Would you like something to eat?"

"Yes please," said Charlie. "I haven't eaten since yesterday morning."

After the meal, Charlie said: "Mother went into hospital a month ago. The doctors think she'll never come out again."

"What did you do?" asked Sydney. "Did you go to Father?"

"He's dead," said Charlie. "The drink killed him in the end."

"But what did you do?" asked Sydney. "Did you get another job in a theatre?"

"In these clothes?" said Charlie. "No. I lived on the streets. I sold flowers for a time, and some woodcutters gave me a little food sometimes ..."

"Didn't you go to Lambeth Town Office? They helped us before."

"I didn't want to go back to Hanwell Schools," said Charlie. "Don't you remember? They cut off our hair before, and the older boys hurt us ... the teachers too, sometimes ... No. It was better to live on the streets."

"I've come home with twenty pounds," said Sydney. "I won't go to sea again. We'll get a room and some new clothes. Then we'll both go back on the stage."

In his new clothes, Charlie soon got a job in a theatre. He played a street newspaper-seller—a job from his real life. The real-life newspapers wrote about him. They called him 'a great child actor'. The play ran for three years in theatres all over the country.

Sydney didn't find a theatre job for a long time. But Charlie could now send him money. Their mother stayed in hospital. She was never well again.

During the next seven years, Charlie's work was his life. He had nothing else. On stage, he was often very funny, and people laughed. Off stage, he was always sad and alone.

Then Charlie fell in love.

"Please, Hetty! Please come out with me on Sunday."

Hetty's eyes were on the floor. She was only fifteen years old, but she was already a dancer. She wasn't ready to fall in love and marry. She didn't want to go out with this young man, but she was sorry for him.

"All right," she said.

Charlie couldn't believe his ears. He went to the bank and took out three pounds—a lot of money for him. He never liked to spend money. But Hetty must have the best.

On Sunday, he took Hetty in a taxi to one of London's most expensive restaurants—*The Trocadero*.

"What would you like to eat?" said Charlie.
"You can have anything you want."

"I don't want anything," said Hetty. She was afraid to eat anything in this famous place.

"You must have *something*," said Charlie.

"I ... I had my supper before I came," said Hetty.

Charlie was also afraid in this place. He asked for too much food, then tried to eat it. While he ate and drank, he talked to Hetty about his love.

"You are as beautiful as the night," he told her.
"I love your black hair and your dark eyes. I can never live without you ..."

Hetty became more afraid. She didn't want this man's love. She only wanted to go home ...

"Marry me!" said Charlie. "I shall die if you don't marry me!"

Hetty jumped up from the table. "I'm going home," she said. "Don't try to follow me."

After that evening, Hetty didn't want to speak to Charlie any more.

But Charlie never forgot Hetty Kelly. She was the first great love of his life. Her dark hair and dark eyes stayed with him all his life.

Chapter Four

Charlie wanted to leave England. Hetty didn't want him, and he knew that his mother would never leave hospital. England only brought him unhappiness. Perhaps America could give him a new start.

Fred Karno was a big name in the English theatre business. He looked for good, funny actors, and, when he found them, he sent them out to theatres in England, Europe and America.

Now Charlie went to him, and said: "I want to work in America."

Fred Karno looked at Charlie. "All right, Chaplin," he said. "I know you're a good actor. You worked for me before. Now listen. I've got a good act called *The Wow-Wows*. They're going to America soon. They're going to play in theatres all over the country. You can go with them. I'll pay you fifteen pounds a week."

The Americans didn't like *The Wow-Wows*. In one part of their act, Charlie came on stage with an empty teacup. He asked for some water.

"Why do you want water?"

"I want to have a bath."

In England, people thought this was funny. But

the New Yorkers didn't laugh. Perhaps the English always had a bath in a teacup?

Charlie began to look at American funny acts. What did they do to be funny? He saw that they were much faster. They spoke faster and they ran round the stage more. They often fell down and had a lot of 'fights'. Charlie started to change his act.

An American theatre newspaper wrote about *The Wow-Wows*. It didn't like the act, but it said about Charlie: 'There was one funny Englishman ... and he will do well in America.'

The Wow-Wows left New York and started to work in theatres all over America. They played in Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Kansas City, San Francisco and Los Angeles. The Americans

Charlie (in the lifebelt) on his way to America

