



# ALONE IN LONDON

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# Chapter 1

## NOT ALONE

It had been a close and sultry day--one of the hottest of the dog-days--even out in the open country, where the dusky green leaves had never stirred upon their stems since the sunrise, and where the birds had found themselves too languid for any songs beyond a faint chirp now and then. All day long the sun had shone down steadily upon the streets of London, with a fierce glare and glowing heat, until the barefooted children had felt the dusty pavement burn under their tread almost as painfully as the icy pavement had frozen their naked feet in the winter. In the parks, and in every open space, especially about the cool splash of the fountains at Charing Cross, the people, who had escaped from the crowded and unventilated back streets, basked in the sunshine, or sought every corner where a shadow could be found. But in the alleys and slums the air was heavy with heat and dust, and thick vapours floated up and down, charged with sickening smells from the refuse of fish and vegetables decaying in the gutters. Overhead the small, straight strip of sky was almost white, and the light, as it fell, seemed to quiver with the burden of its own burning heat.

Out of one of the smaller thoroughfares lying between Holborn and the Strand, there opens a narrow alley, not more than six or seven feet across, with high buildings on each side. In the most part the ground floors consist of small shops; for the alley is not a blind one, but leads from the thoroughfare to another street, and forms, indeed, a short cut to it, pretty often used. These shops are not of any size or importance--a greengrocer's, with a somewhat scanty

choice of vegetables and fruit, a broker's, displaying queer odds and ends of household goods, two or three others, and at the end farthest from the chief thoroughfare, but nearest to the quiet and respectable street beyond, a very modest-looking little shop-window, containing a few newspapers, some rather yellow packets of stationery, and two or three books of ballads. Above the door was painted, in very small, dingy letters, the words, "James Oliver, News Agent."

The shop was even smaller, in proportion, than its window. After two customers had entered--if such an event could ever come to pass--it would have been almost impossible to find room for a third. Along the end ran a little counter, with a falling flap by which admission could be gained to the living-room lying behind the shop. This evening the flap was down--a certain sign that James Oliver, the news agent, had some guest within, for otherwise there would have been no occasion to lessen the scanty size of the counter. The room beyond was dark, very dark indeed, for the time of day; for, though the evening was coming on, and the sun was hastening to go down at last, it had not yet ceased to shine brilliantly upon the great city. But inside James Oliver's house the gas was already lighted in a little steady flame, which never flickered in the still, hot air, though both door and window were wide open. For there was a window, though it was easy to overlook it, opening into a passage four feet wide, which led darkly up into a still closer and hotter court, lying in the very core of the maze of streets. As the houses were four stories high, it is easy to understand that very little sunlight could penetrate to Oliver's room behind his shop, and that even at noonday it was twilight there. This room was of a better size altogether than a stranger might have supposed, having two or three queer little nooks and recesses borrowed from the space belonging to the adjoining house; for the buildings were old, and had probably been one large dwelling in former times. It was

plainly the only apartment the owner had; and all its arrangements were those of a man living alone, for there was something almost desolate about the look of the scanty furniture, though it was clean and whole. There had been a fire, but it had died out, and the coals were black in the grate, while the kettle still sat upon the top bar with a melancholy expression of neglect about it.

James Oliver himself had placed his chair near to the open door, where he could keep his eye upon the shop--a needless precaution, as at this hour no customers ever turned into it. He was an old man, and seemed very old and infirm by the dim light. He was thin and spare, with that peculiar spareness which results from the habit of always eating less than one can. His teeth, which had never had too much to do, had gone some years ago, and his cheeks fell in rather deeply. A fine network of wrinkles puckered about the corners of his eyes and mouth. He stooped a good deal, and moved about with the slowness and deliberation of age. Yet his face was very pleasant--a cheery, gentle, placid face, lighted up with a smile now and then, but with sufficient rareness to make it the more welcome and the more noticed when it came.

Old Oliver had a visitor this hot evening, a neat, small, dapper woman, with a little likeness to himself, who had been putting his room to rights, and looking to the repairs needed by his linen. She was just replacing her needle, cotton, and buttons in an old-fashioned housewife, which she always carried in her pocket, and was then going to put on her black silk bonnet and coloured shawl, before bidding him goodbye.

"Eh, Charlotte," said Oliver, after drawing a long and toilsome breath, "what would I give to be a-top of the Wrekin, seeing the sun set this evening! Many and many's

the summer afternoon we've spent there when we were young, and all of us alive. Dost remember how many a mile of country we could see all round us, and how fresh the air blew across the thousands of green fields? Why, I saw Snowdon once, more than sixty miles off, when my eyes were young and it was a clear sunset. I always think of the top of the Wrekin when I read of Moses going up Mount Pisgah and seeing all the land about him, north and south, east and west. Eh, lass! there's a change in us all now!"

"Ah! it's like another world!" said the old woman, shaking her head slowly. "All the folks I used to sew for at Aston, and Uppington, and Overlehill, they'd mostly be gone or dead by now. It wouldn't seem like the same place at all. And now there's none but you and me left, brother James. Well, well! its lonesome, growing old."

"Yes, lonesome, yet not exactly lonesome," replied old Oliver, in a dreamy voice. "I'm growing dark a little, and just a trifle deaf, and I don't feel quite myself like I used to do; but I've got something I didn't use to have. Sometimes of an evening, before I've lit the gas, I've a sort of a feeling as if I could almost see the Lord Jesus, and hear him talking to me. He looks to me something like our eldest brother, him that died when we were little. Charlotte, thee remembers him? A white, quiet, patient face, with a smile like the sun shining behind clouds. Well, whether it's only a dream or no I cannot tell, but there's a face looks at me, or seems to look at me out of the dusk; and I think to myself, maybe the Lord Jesus says, 'Old Oliver's lonesome down there in the dark, and his eyes growing dim. I'll make myself half-plain to him.' Then he comes and sits rere with me for a little while."

"Oh, that's all fancy as comes with you living quite alone," said Charlotte, sharply.

"Perhaps so! perhaps so!" answered the old man, with a meek sigh; "but I should be very lonesome without that."

They did not speak again until Charlotte had given a final shake to the bed in the corner, upon which her bonnet and shawl had been lying. She put them on neatly and primly; and when she was ready to go she spoke again in a constrained and mysterious manner.

"Heard nothing of Susan, I suppose?" she said.

"Not a word," answered old Oliver, sadly. "It's the only trouble I've got. That were the last passion I ever went into, and I was hot and hasty, I know."

"So you always used to be at times," said his sister.

"Ah! but that passion was the worst of all," he went on, speaking slowly. "I told her if she married young Raleigh, she should never darken my doors again--never again. And she took me at my word though she might have known it was nothing but father's hot temper. Darken my doors! Why, the brightest sunshine I could have 'ud be to see her come smiling into my shop, like she used to do at home."

"Well, I think Susan ought to have humbled herself," said Charlotte. "It's going on for six years now, and she's had time enough to see her folly. Do you know where she is?"

"I know nothing about her," he answered, shaking his head sorrowfully. "Young Raleigh was wild, very wild, and that was my objection to him; but I didn't mean Susan to take me at my word. I shouldn't speak so hasty and hot now."

"And to think. I'd helped to bring her up so genteel, and with such pretty manners!" cried the old woman, indignantly.

"She might have done so much better with her cleverness



too. Such a milliner as she might have turned out! Well good-bye, brother James, and don't go having any more of those visions; they're not wholesome for you."

"I should be very lonesome without them," answered Oliver. "Good-bye, Charlotte, good-bye, and God bless you. Come again as soon as you can."

He went with her to the door, and stayed to watch her along the quiet alley, till she turned into the street. Then, with a last nod to the back of her bonnet, as she passed out of his sight, he returned slowly into his dark shop, put up the flap of the counter, and retreated to the darker room within. Hot as it was, he fancied it was growing a little chilly with the coming of the night, and he drew on his old coat, and threw a handkerchief over his white head, and then sat down in the dusk, looking out into his shop and the alley beyond it. He must have fallen into a doze after a while, being overcome with the heat, and lulled by the constant hum of the streets, which reached his dull ear in a softened murmur; for at length he started up almost in a fright, and found that complete darkness had fallen upon him suddenly, as it seemed to him. A church clock was striking nine, and his shop was not closed yet. He went out hurriedly to put the shutters up.

## Chapter 2

### WAIFS AND STRAYS

In the shop it was not yet so dark but that old Oliver could see his way out with the shutters, which during the day occupied a place behind the door. He lifted the flap of the counter, and was about to go on with his usual business, when a small voice, trembling a little, and speaking from the floor at his very feet, caused him to pause suddenly.

"Please, here's a little girl here," said the voice.

Oliver stooped down to bring his eyes nearer to the ground, until he could make out the indistinct outline of the figure of a child, seated on his shop floor, and closely hugging a dog in her arms. Her face looked small to him; it was pale, as if she had been crying quietly, and though he could not see them, a large tear stood on each of her cheeks.

"What little girl are you?" he asked, almost timidly.

"Here called me Dolly," answered the child.

"Haven't you any other name?" inquired old Oliver

"Nothing else but Poppet," she said; "here call me Dolly sometimes, and Poppet sometimes. Ris is my little dog, Beppo."

She introduced the dog by pushing its nose into his hand, and Beppo complacently wagged his tail and licked the old man's withered fingers.

"What brings you here in my shop, my little woman?" asked Oliver.