

## Chapter 1

### Attack on the Cathedral Steps



The great hound nosed its way through the dense, sour fog that swirled in the narrow alleys of London's east side. Somewhere ahead it smelled human, maybe still alive or maybe food in the gutter. It was hungry enough to eat anything.

A growl rumbled deep in its throat as it rounded the corner and surveyed the cobblestone street ahead. Its huge head hung low to the ground, a torn lip revealing a sharp fang. Coarse, gray hair spiked along the ridge of its back. The lone gas light in front of Saint Paul's Cathedral cast a greenish glow through the mist. No one there.

Or was there? Deep in the shadows of the side door to the cathedral lay a black heap. The dog approached quietly, sniffing the heavy air. No death here . . . but maybe there would be something to eat just the same.

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Jack Crumpton came awake slowly. Why was Mama pulling on his night shirt? Why was his bed so hard? Why was he so cold?

And then it all came back to him. He wasn't in bed . . . Mama was dead, and he and Amy were homeless on the streets of London.

He rolled over with a start. There, snarling and pulling on the sleeve of his coat, stood the biggest wolf-dog he'd ever seen. Jack grabbed for his stick. It was caught under Amy. He pulled it free and swung it at the beast's immense head. The creature ducked the blow without loosening his bite on the coat.

Just then Amy sat up and screamed, "Don't let him have it, Jack! The biscuits in your pocket are our last food."

With one hand Jack pulled with all his might on his coat. With the other he swung his stick toward the dog's nose. This time the stout stick landed with a sharp whack. The brute yelped and made one more desperate lunge backwards, its ugly fangs still embedded in the sleeve of Jack's old coat. The strength of the beast pulled Jack over and he rolled down the steps. But he wouldn't give up his coat.

And then with a sickening rip, the sleeve tore free, and the dog made off into the gloom with Jack's sleeve flapping around its head like a neck scarf in a winter blow.

Jack rose slowly to his knees on the grimy street and tried to inspect his coat by the dim glow of the nearby street light. Safely in its pocket there remained two small hunks of bread no bigger than his fists.

"You all right?" asked Amy as she came down to help him up.

"Yeah, but he got me sleeve. Guess I'll have one cold arm come winter."

"Don't worry, Jack. By then we'll find Uncle Sedgwick, and he'll surely take us in."

"I hope so," Jack said as he followed his older sister back up the steps to huddle in the skimpy shelter of the doorway to the great cathedral. Amy shared her shawl with him, wrapping the garment that their mother had knitted around the both of them. In the dim light its beautiful light and dark greens looked like gray and black, but it was still just as warm.

London had been strange and unfriendly to the two children. They had come to the city a few weeks earlier with their mother after their father had died in a coal mine accident. Mama hoped to find her brother Sedgwick Masters, a successful tailor. But in London in the fall of 1881, it wasn't so easy to track someone down if you weren't sure of his address. Mama's cough seemed worse after the damp, two-day journey to London, so they found lodging where the landlady charged two shillings per night for an unheated gable room at the back of a dreary house.

The next day, Mother was too ill to look for Uncle Sedgwick. She soon got so sick that the children didn't dare leave her side. They took turns going out to find a penny's worth of bread or some vegetables or broth and bringing it back to Mama. And each day Mrs. Witherspoon, the landlady, came pounding on the door demanding the rent until in one week's time almost all their money was gone.

"You can't stay here without paying your rent," the old landlady had said gruffly. Jack thought her face looked like a prune.

"We'll pay," promised Mother, and then fell into a great fit of coughing that brought up more blood. When she finally got her breath back, she said, "Just give me a chance to get well and find my brother, Sedgwick Masters, the tailor."

"I've never heard of any tailor by that name. Besides, you got consumption, woman. You ain't never gonna get well."

The old woman had been right. Four days later Mother Crumpton died in her sleep.



When Witherspoon came for the rent the next morning, she started shrieking twice as loud as the children had cried during the night. "I told you! I told you she'd never make it. Now what am I going to do? What am I going to do? You two young'uns get out of here. I should never have let this room out to you in the first place." She paced back and forth wringing her hands. "What am I ever going to do?" Then she looked at the children again: "Get out! Get out, I told you."

"But we can't go—that's our mama," protested Amy.

"Was . . . was. She *was* your mama. She ain't no more. This here's just a body that I'm going to have to pay to have taken away. And this room ain't yours any more, so get out!"

Fighting back the tears, Jack went over and struggled with the trunk that held all their belongings. He was strong for twelve years of age, and Amy, who was just two years older, could put in a full day's work. But they would have done well to get the trunk down the stairs, let alone carry it any distance through London's narrow, busy streets.

"You can just leave that right there," growled old lady Witherspoon. "I'll hold it as collateral 'til you pay up. You owe me five days rent plus whatever it costs to have this body taken away. Until you pay up, you can just leave that trunk right here. Now go find that rich uncle of yours, if you got one."

The two children, numb with grief, had wandered aimlessly around London's lower east side until they fell asleep in the doorway of the great cathedral. Now wide awake, their hearts beating loudly as they peered into the darkness, fearful that the beast would return, Amy resolved, "Tomorrow, Jack. Tomorrow we'll go find Uncle Sedgwick."

They arranged their coats over themselves as they cuddled together. Jack listened to the night as the distant wail of a baby's cry drifted through the dense fog.

Yes, tomorrow they had to find Uncle Sedgwick.