

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1840

In the bleak winter of 1840, London is beset by early snowfall, chilling temperatures, and an oppressive, polluted atmosphere. The Thames, once a river renowned for its fresh waters and plentiful fish, now runs murky and tainted, bearing the burden of industrial waste, human refuse, and decaying corpses. This neglect underscores the city's rapid industrialization, which has made it the world's most crowded metropolis. Amidst this grim environment, toshers, determined scavengers of the riverbanks, valiantly search for valuables among the filth—coins, scraps of metal, and sometimes precious items inadvertently discarded.

On a particularly frigid November morning, a group of toshers diligently combs the Chelsea shore. They must navigate the dangers of flooded sewers and the risk of accidents, often working in teams for safety. Among them is Arabella, a heavily pregnant woman whose husband, a once-promising carpenter, now drowns his potential in alcohol. Despite her condition, she toils, motivated by a desperate need to provide for herself and her child.

While her companions rummage through the sludge, Arabella unexpectedly feels labor pains and, alarmed, expresses her distress to an elderly toshers' member. Panic ensues as her waters break in the filthy riverbanks. The group rushes to help, but uncertainty looms as Arabella confesses her husband's absence and her dire situation—her meager earnings scarcely support her own hunger, let alone a newborn.

Amid this chaos, a royal scene unfolds in Buckingham Palace as Queen Victoria also endures the pains of childbirth. The contrasting realities of motherhood highlight the disparities of life in London. In the dirt and squalor, Arabella's baby—a boy—is born by the water's edge. Named King Arthur by the compassionate toshers gathered around, he begins life under starkly different circumstances than the royal child, yet embodies hope and the potential for a new beginning.

Despite his grim surroundings, Arthur, gifted with an extraordinary memory, senses the world's beauty in the falling snow. This moment defines him as a child of the Thames, forever shaped by the stark realities and contrasts of life in Victorian London. His remarkable ability to remember everything he experiences, while a blessing, also hints at the burdens he will face as he grows. This environment, fraught with challenges and uncertainty, frames his early existence, setting the stage for his journey ahead, seeded with both promise and hardship.