

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1871

On a warm June day in 1871, Arthur walks briskly through Piccadilly, preoccupied with his thoughts and clutching a scented silk handkerchief. He has recently started growing a beard, adjusting to this new aspect of himself. His pocket holds a perfume he formulated from an ancient Mesopotamian recipe by a female parfumeur named Tapputi, a blend that reflects his dedication to both his work and his personal style, albeit at a high cost. Despite his years of studying tablets at the British Museum, he has yet to receive a promotion, emphasizing his sense of frustration.

Arthur's thoughts frequently return to profound loneliness, exacerbated by the absence of his family. His younger brother lives in Yorkshire, having distanced himself from London, and he has not seen his mother in four years after she was institutionalized for mental distress. The fabric of his family life feels shredded, mirroring the fragmented state of his professional recognition.

As he moves past St James's Church, he is caught in the noise of the city, where vendors shout and the clatter of carriages resounds. A newspaper boy's shout jolts him: "The author is dead! Mr. Dickens has gone to meet his Maker!" Arthur buys a paper and is struck by the poignancy of the news, reflecting on the fleeting nature of extraordinary lives. He contrasts the end of Dickens's life with joyful news from the London Zoo—a new calf born to the hippopotamuses, symbolizing life amid death.

Upon arriving at the British Museum, Arthur immerses himself in his research, locking his door to shut out the world. His solitude shifts the next day as he, now invigorated, impulsively calls for a meeting with trustees and colleagues, an unusual move for the typically reticent Arthur. He shares a newfound discovery from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, revealing a story of a catastrophic flood and alluding to parallels with the biblical Noah's Ark. His impassioned revelation gets met with enthusiasm, conviction igniting within him as a sense of importance swells.

The public's interest burgeons around his discovery, drawing Arthur into an unexpected spotlight. The prime minister, William Ewart Gladstone, invites him to lecture at the Society of Biblical Archaeology, though Arthur feels ill-equipped to handle such an esteemed platform. On the night before the event, he struggles with sleeplessness, petrified but determined to make his mark.

During the lecture, he elaborates on Mesopotamian history and its civilizations, culminating in his interpretation of the Flood Tablet. The success of his presentation leads to genuine applause and admiration, yet he is overwhelmed by the newfound public scrutiny and media attention, culminating in various sensational articles detailing his life and achievements—some flattering, others distorting. Despite the accolades, he feels the weight of nerves and vulnerability, particularly about his humble beginnings, leaving him feeling exposed amidst the bustling city that thrum with discussions about him.