

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1852

In the year 1852, Arthur, a clever and eccentric boy, grows up in the impoverished Sews and Slums beside the River Thames. By age five, he has learned the details about all his neighbors, even picking up Yiddish from a Jewish–Russian family at eight, along with an ability to replicate the sounds and sights of his community with remarkable precision. Enrolled in a ragged school aimed at educating destitute children, Arthur finds himself among peers who come from backgrounds of poverty, crime, and neglect. The conditions at the school are grim, and students often leave, seeking better alternatives, yet Arthur persists, benefiting from the daily food and the chance to learn.

Despite being overshadowed by more boisterous classmates, Arthur, now twelve, is hardworking and dedicated, quickly mastering lessons and assisting his teacher, Mr. Hopkin. His introverted nature and tendency to daydream, paired with his disheveled appearance, often render him invisible. One fateful day, while arriving late due to taking care of his unwell mother, Arthur is confronted by a strict substitute teacher. This teacher, dismissing Arthur's explanation about his absence, belittles him and prepares to discipline him for asserting that a math assignment had been miscalculated.

After enduring a physically punishing encounter with the headmaster, Arthur's intelligence is inadvertently acknowledged, revealing his exceptional memory and aptitude for learning. Although he faces severe punishment, Arthur conveys to the headmaster a memory from his past, showcasing not only his academic ability but also an awareness of the world – a world beyond the slums where history and culture exist.

As Arthur leaves the school for the last time, he grapples with fear and hunger but finds himself inexplicably drawn to the British Museum. There, he is captivated by the sight of immense stone sculptures being transported, historical artifacts that embody the ancient civilization of King Ashurbanipal. His encounter with Dr. Samuel Birch, the museum's Keeper of Oriental Antiquities, leaves him with a profound sense of curiosity and a taste for knowledge, igniting aspirations beyond his current impoverished state. The chapter closes with Arthur feeling a kinship with the bound stone beasts as they, too, struggle with their new existence in an unfamiliar land.