

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1856

In the year before Arthur turns sixteen, his family's financial struggles force him to work extra shifts to pay the rent. Waking before dawn, he maintains a strict personal hygiene routine, washing with diluted vinegar and cold water, despite the poor quality soap provided by charity. The streets of London at these early hours are a somber sight, filled with beggars and those defeated by life, one morning revealing a man who has frozen to death on the sidewalk.

Hunger plagues Arthur daily, often beginning with a simple bread roll that he tries to accompany with a bit of butter or a warm drink at a nearby stall. He takes small joys in bringing treats home for his mother and little brother, clinging to these moments to add meaning to his existence. By night, the weariness from his labor prevents him from reading, leaving him devoid of dreams and hope. The memory of his deceased brother weighs heavily on him, while fleeting moments of beauty, like the songs of gulls or the scent of roasting chestnuts, offer him brief solace.

At the office one morning, Arthur becomes engrossed in examining illustrations for a potential English reprint of "The Works of Rabelais." His admiration for visual storytelling contrasts with his self-doubt about his artistic abilities. Suddenly, the door bursts open and a man, later revealed to be Charles Dickens, rushes in seeking Mr. Evans. Dickens expresses interest in publishing with their firm but is soon reminded of Mr. Bradbury's passing. The boy identifies himself as Mr. Bradbury's apprentice, earning Dickens' attention and heartfelt acknowledgment of Arthur's potential.

Their conversation touches on Arthur's unique perceptiveness and the challenges faced by authors under oppressive publishing contracts, with Dickens expressing a desire to change his own situation by proposing a partnership with Mr. Evans. Their agreement results in four successful novels being published, although their attempt to launch the "Daily News" fails financially.

Months later, Arthur meets a disheveled Dickens who brings an exotic treat from the Ottoman lands, revealing more about the author's personal struggles amid rumors of his infidelity. As they talk, Arthur shares his aspiration to visit Nineveh, and Dickens provides him with a gift—tailored clothing to help him experience the world beyond the limitations of his upbringing. A letter accompanying the gift encourages Arthur to seek out new horizons, hinting at a journey that promises transformation. Dickens, however, soon vanishes into his turbulent personal life, leaving Arthur with the hope of a brighter future that extends beyond London's confines.