

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1857–8

In the chapter titled "By the River Thames, 1857–8," the story follows Arthur, referred to as King Arthur of the Sewers and Slums, as he starts his role at the British Museum. With a newfound purpose, he is introduced to the Keeper of Oriental Antiquities and his assistant, Edward, who is everything Arthur is not: well-educated, fit, and from a wealthy background. Edward's polite demeanor contrasts sharply with Arthur's self-consciousness, marked by his lack of formal education and the state of his attire.

Upon entering the museum, the enormity of the task ahead is daunting; Arthur must work with over thirty-five thousand clay tablets from Mesopotamia, many of which are damaged and fragmented. Despite expectations that he would soon quit, Arthur returns day after day, perceiving order where others see chaos. This work is not just labor for him; it becomes an invigorating puzzle as he aims to uncover the stories contained within the fragments, propelling him to delve into the ancient past.

Arthur's fascination intensifies as he begins to relate to the original creators of the tablets, envisioning their struggles and experiences. He finds humorous and poignant inscriptions that reveal human emotions and frustrations, indicating the timeless universality of human experience. Each successful deciphering of a tablet becomes an enlightening moment for Arthur, and the mundane records of transactions transform into a miraculous link to ancient lives.

As Arthur perseveres with these tablets, the British Museum also undergoes a transformation, shifting from a chaotic collection of items to a more structured and academically focused institution. Arthur, at first an outsider, discovers that the field of Mesopotamian studies lacks the hierarchical structure of his peers' fields, offering him a rare opportunity to contribute and grow in knowledge equally.

However, challenges arise; his home life deteriorates, leading to eviction notices and cramped living conditions. As Arthur becomes increasingly disheveled, concerns about his job security mount. His parents are overwhelmed by their struggles, exacerbated by his father's issues with drinking and his mother's declining health.

Amidst the personal turmoil, Arthur makes a fortuitous discovery in a tablet that hints at poetry—an extraordinary revelation that inspires a deeper dedication to his work. This newfound passion helps him secure a full-time position at the museum, where he vows to piece together and preserve the voices of the past. In doing so, he finds his purpose: tending to what history has discarded, much like the flowing River Thames that symbolizes continuity and remembrance .