



Riceyman

Steps

Arnold Bennett

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The story takes place in 1919-1920 and deals with the final year in the life of its main character, Henry Earlfoward, a miser, who keeps a second-hand bookshop in the Clerkenwell area of London. Henry marries Violet Arb, a widow who keeps a neighbouring shop, and who sees in Henry a financially secure future. Henry's parsimony drives them into an increasingly wretched existence. Their lives are contrasted to that of their maid servant Elsie Sprickett and it is she, despite her extreme poverty, who brings life and a future to the bittersweet tale.

PUBLISHER NOTES:

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Part 1

Chapter

1 Riceyman steps

On an autumn afternoon of 1919 a hatless man with a slight limp might have been observed ascending the gentle, broad acclivity of Riceyman Steps, which lead from King's Cross Road up to Riceyman Square, in the great metropolitan industrial district of Clerkenwell. He was rather less than stout and rather more than slim. His thin hair had begun to turn from black to grey, but his complexion was still fairly good, and the rich, very red lips, under a small greyish moustache and over a short, pointed beard, were quite remarkable in their suggestion of vitality. The brown eyes seemed a little small; they peered at near objects. As to his age, an experienced and cautious observer of mankind, without previous knowledge of this man, would have said no more than that he must be past forty. The man himself was certainly entitled to say that he was in the prime of life. He wore a neat dark-grey suit, which must have been carefully folded at nights, a low, white, starched collar, and a "made" black tie that completely hid the shirt-front; the shirt-cuffs could not be seen. He was shod in old, black leather slippers, well polished. He gave an appearance of quiet, intelligent, refined and kindly prosperity; and in his little eyes shone the varying lights of emotional sensitiveness.

Riceyman Steps, twenty in number, are divided by a half-landing into two series of ten. The man stopped on the half-landing and swung round with a casual air of purposelessness which, however, concealed, imperfectly, a definite design. The suspicious and cynical, slyly watching his movements, would have thought: "What's that fellow after?"

A man interested in a strange woman acquires one equine attribute—he can look in two directions at once. This man could, and did, look in two directions at once.

Below him and straight in front he saw a cobbled section of King's Cross Road—a hell of noise and dust and dirt, with the County of London tram-cars, and motor-lorries and heavy horse-drawn vans sweeping north and south in a vast clangour of iron thudding and grating on iron and granite, beneath the bedroom windows of a defenceless populace. On the far side of the road were, conspicuous to the right, the huge, red Nell Gwynn Tavern, set on the site of Nell's still huger palace, and displaying printed exhortations to buy fruity Portuguese wines and to attend meetings of workers; and, conspicuous to the left, red Rowton House, surpassing in immensity even Nell's vanished palace, divided into hundreds and hundreds of clean cubicles for the accommodation of the defeated and the futile at a few coppers a night, and displaying on its

iron façade a newspaper promise to divulge the names of the winners of horse-races. Nearer to the man who could look two ways lay the tiny open space (not open to vehicular traffic) which was officially included in the title "Riceyman Steps." At the south corner of this was a second-hand bookseller's shop, and at the north an abandoned and decaying mission-hall; both these abutted on King's Cross Road. Then, on either hand, farther from the thoroughfare and nearer the steps, came a few private houses with carefully curtained windows, and one other shop—a confectioner's. And next, also on either hand, two business "yards" full of lorries, goods, gear, and the hum of hidden machinery. And the earth itself faintly throbbed; for, to the vibrations of traffic and manufacture, the Underground Railway, running beneath Riceyman Steps, added the muffled uproar of its subterranean electric trains.

While gazing full at the spectacle of King's Cross Road the man on the steps peered downwards on his right at the confectioner's shop, which held the woman who had begun to inflame him. He failed to descry her, but his thoughts pleasantly held her image, and she held his thoughts. He dreamed that one day he would share with her sympathetic soul his own vision of this wonderful Clerkenwell in which he lived and she now lived. He would explain to her eager ear that once Clerkenwell was a murmuring green land of medicinal springs, wells, streams with mills on their banks, nunneries, aristocrats, and holy clerks who presented mystery-plays. Yes, he would tell her about the drama of Adam and Eve being performed in the costume of Adam and Eve to a simple and unshocked people. (Why not? She was a widow and no longer young.) And he would point out to her how the brown backs of the houses which fronted on King's Cross Road resembled the buttressed walls of a mighty fortress, and how the grim, ochreish, unwindowed backs of the houses of Riceyman Square (behind him) looked just like lofty, mediæval keeps. And he would relate to her the story of the palace of Nell Gwynn, contemporary of Louise de la Vallière, and dividing with Louise the honour of being the first and most ingenuous of modern vampires. Never before had he had the idea of unfolding his mind on these enthralling subjects to a woman.

Rain began to fall. It fell on the bargain-books exposed in a stand outside the bookseller's shop. The man did not move. Then a swift gentlemanly person stepped suddenly out of King's Cross Road into the approach to the steps, and after a moment's hesitation entered the shop. The man on the steps quietly limped down and followed the potential customer into the shop, which was his own.

Chapter

2 The customer

The shop had one window in King's Cross Road, but the entrance, with another window, was in Riceyman Steps. The King's Cross Road window held only cheap editions, in their paper jackets, of popular modern novels, such as those of Ethel M. Dell, Charles Garvice, Zane Grey, Florence Barclay, Nat Gould, and Gene Stratton Porter. The side window was set out with old books, first editions, illustrated editions, and complete library editions in calf or morocco of renowned and serious writers, whose works, indispensable to the collections of self-respecting book-gentlemen (as distinguished from bookmen), have passed through decades of criticism into the impregnable paradise of eternal esteem. The side window was bound to attract the attention of collectors and bibliomaniacs. It seemed strangely, even fatally, out of place in that dingy and sordid neighbourhood where existence was a dangerous and difficult adventure in almost frantic quest of food, drink and shelter, where the familiar and beloved landmarks were public-houses, and where the immense majority of the population read nothing but sporting prognostications and results, and, on Sunday mornings, accounts of bloody crimes and juicy sexual irregularities.

Nevertheless, the shop was, in fact, well placed in Riceyman Steps. It had a picturesque air, and Riceyman Steps also had a picturesque air, with all its outworn shabbiness, grime and decay. The steps leading up to Riceyman Square, the glimpse of the Square at the top, with its church bearing a massive cross on the west front, the curious perpendicular effects of the tall, blind, ochreish houses—all these touched the imagination of every man who had in his composition any unusually strong admixture of the universal human passion—love of the past. The shop reinforced the appeal of its environment. The shop was in its right appropriate place. To the secret race of collectors always ravenously desiring to get something for much less than its real value, the window in Riceyman Steps was irresistible. And all manner of people, including book-collectors, passed along King's Cross Road in the course of a day. And all the collectors upon catching sight of the shop exclaimed in their hearts: "What a queer spot for a bookshop! Bargains!..." Moreover, the business was of old date and therefore had firmly established connexions quite extra-local. Scores of knowing persons knew about it, and were proud of their knowledge. "What!" they would say with affected surprise to acquaintances of their own tastes. "You don't know Riceyman Steps, King's Cross Road? Best hunting-ground in London!" The name "Riceyman" on a signboard, whose paint

had been flaking off for twenty years, also enhanced the prestige of the shop, for it proved ancient local associations. Riceyman must be of the true ancient blood of Clerkenwell.

The customer, with his hands behind him and his legs somewhat apart, was staring at a case of calf-bindings. A short, carefully dressed man, dapper and alert, he had the air neither of a bookman nor of a member of the upper-middle class.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. I just had to slip out, and I've nobody else here," said the bookseller quietly and courteously, but with no trace of obsequiousness.

"Not at all!" replied the customer. "I was very interested in the books here."

The bookseller, like many shopkeepers a fairly sure judge of people, perceived instantly that the customer must have acquired deportment from somewhere after adolescence, together with the art of dressing. There was abruptness in his voice, and the fact was that he had learnt manners above his original station in a strange place—Palestine, under Allenby.

"I suppose you haven't got such a thing as a Shakspeare in stock; I mean a pretty good one?"

"What sort of a Shakspeare? I've got a number of Shaksperes."

"Well, I don't quite know... I've been thinking for a long time I ought to have a Shakspeare."

"Illustrated?" asked the bookseller, who had now accurately summed up his client as one who might know something of the world, but who was a simpleton in regard to books.

"I really haven't thought." The customer gave a slight good-humoured snigger. "I suppose it would be nice to have pictures to look at."

"I have a good clean Boydell, and a Dalziel. But perhaps they'd be rather big."

"Um!"

"You can't hold them, except on a desk or on your knee."

"Ah! That wouldn't do! Oh, not at all!" The customer, who was nonplussed by the names mentioned, snatched at the opportunity given to decline them.

"I've got a nice little edition in eight volumes, very handy, with outline drawings by Flaxman, and nicely printed. You don't often see it. Not like any other Shakspeare I know of. Quite cheap too."

"Um!"

"I'll see if I can put my hand on it."

The shop was full of bays formed by bookshelves protruding at right-angles from the walls. The first bay was well lighted and tidy; but the others, as they receded into the gloomy backward of the shop, were darker and darker and untidier and untidier. The effect was of mysterious and vast populations of books imprisoned for ever in

everlasting shade, chained, deprived of air and sun and movement, hopeless, resigned, martyred. The bookseller stepped over piles of cast books into the farthest bay, which was carpeted a foot thick with a disorder of volumes, and lighted a candle.

"You don't use the electric light in that corner," said the client, briskly following. He pointed to a dust-covered lamp in the grimy ceiling.

"Fuse gone. They do go," the bookseller answered blandly; and the blandness was not in the least impaired by his private thought that the customer's remark came near to impudence. Searching, he went on: "We're not quite straight here yet. The truth is, we haven't been straight since 1914."

"Dear me! Five years!"

Another piece of good-humoured cheek.

"I suppose you couldn't step in to-morrow?" the bookseller suggested, after considerable groping and spilling of tallow.

"Afraid not," said the customer with polite reluctance. "Very busy ... I was just passing and it struck me."

"The Globe edition is very good, you know ... Standard text. Macmillans. Nothing better of *the sort*. I could sell you that for three-and-six."

"Sounds promising," said the customer brightly.

The bookseller blew out the candle and dusted one hand with the other.

"Of course it's not illustrated."

"Oh, well, after all, a Shakspeare's for *reading*, isn't it?" said the customer, for whom Shakspeare was a volume, not a man.

While the bookseller was wrapping up the green Globe Shakspeare in a creased bit of brown paper with an addressed label on it—he put the label inside—the customer cleared his throat and said with a nervous laugh:

"I think you employ here a young charwoman, don't you?"

The bookseller looked up in mild surprise, peering. He was startled and alarmed, but his feelings seldom appeared on his face.

"I do." He thought: "What is this inquisitive fellow getting at? It's not what I call manners, anyhow."

"Her name's Elsie, I think. I don't know her surname."

The bookseller went on with his packing and said naught.

"As I'm here I thought I might as well ask you," the customer continued with a fresh nervous laugh. "I ought to explain that my name's Raste, Dr. Raste, of Myddelton Square. Dare say you've heard of me. From *your* name your family belongs to the district?"

"Yes," agreed the bookseller. "I do."

He was very proud of the name Riceyman, and he did not explain that it was the name only of his deceased uncle, and that his own name was Earlforward.

"I've got a lad in my service," the doctor continued. "Shell-shock case. He's improving, but I find he's running after this girl Elsie. Quite O.K., of course. Most respectable. Only it's putting him off his work, and I just thought as I happened to be in here you wouldn't mind me asking you about her. Is she a good girl? I'd like him to marry—if it's the right sort. Might do him a lot of good."

"She's right enough," answered the bookseller calmly and indifferently. "I've nothing against her."

"Had her long?"

"Oh, some time."

The bookseller said no more. Beneath his impassive and courteous exterior he hid a sudden spasm of profound agitation. The next minute Dr. Raste departed, but immediately returned.

"Afraid your books outside are getting a bit wet," he cried from the doorway.

"Thank you. Thank you," said the bookseller mildly and unperturbed, thinking: "He must be a managing and interfering kind of man. Can't I run my own business?"

Some booksellers kept waterproof covers for their outside display, but this one did not. He had found in practice that a few drops of rain did no harm to low-priced volumes.

Chapter

3 The bookseller at home

At the back of the rather spacious and sombre shop (which by reason of the bays of bookshelves seemed larger than it really was) came a small room, with a doorway, but no door, into the shop. This was the proprietor's den. Seated at his desk therein he could see through a sort of irregular lane of books to the bright oblong of the main entrance, which was seldom closed. There were more books to the cubic foot in the private room even than in the shop. They rose in tiers to the ceiling and they lay in mounds on the floor; they also covered most of the flat desk and all the window-sill; some were perched on the silent grandfather's clock, the sole piece of furniture except the desk, a safe, and two chairs, and a step-ladder for reaching the higher shelves.

The bookseller retired to this room, as to a retreat, upon the departure of Dr. Raste, and looked about, fingering one thing or another in a mild, amicable manner, and disclosing not the least annoyance, ill-humour, worry, or pressure of work. He sat down to a cumbrous old typewriter on the desk, and after looking at some correspondence, inserted a sheet of cheap letter-paper into the machine. The printed letter-head on the sheet was "T. T. Riceyman," but in fulfilment of the new law the name of the actual proprietor "Henry Earlforward," had been added (in violet, with an indiarubber stamp, and crookedly).

Mr. Earlforward began to tap, placidly and very deliberately, as one who had the whole of eternity before him for the accomplishment of his task. A little bell rang; the machine dated from the age when typewriters had this contrivance for informing the operator that the end of a line would be reached in two or three more taps. Then a great clatter occurred at the window, and the room became dark. The blue-black blind had slipped down, discharging thick clouds of dust.

"Dear, dear!" murmured Mr. Earlforward, groping towards the window. He failed to raise the blind again; the cord was broken. As he coughed gently in the dust, he could not recall that the blind had been once drawn since the end of the war.

"I must have that seen to," he murmured, and turned on the electric light over the desk.

The porcelain shade of the lamp wore a heavy layer of dust, which, however, had not arrived from the direction of the blind, being the product of slow, secular accumulation. Mr. Earlforward regretted to be compelled to use electric current—and rightly, considering the price!—but the occasion was quite special. He could not see to tap by a candle.

Many a time on winter evenings he had gently told an unimportant customer in that room that a fuse had gone—and lighted a candle.

He was a solitary man, and content in his solitude; at any rate, he had been content until the sight of the newly-come lady across the way began to disturb the calm deep of his mind. He was a man of routine, and happy in routine. Dr. Raste's remarks about his charwoman were seriously upsetting him. He foresaw the possibility, if the charwoman should respond to the alleged passion of her suitor, of a complete derangement of his existence. But he was not a man to go out to meet trouble. He had faith in time, which for him was endless and inexhaustible, and even in this grave matter of his domesticity he could calmly reflect that if the lady across the way (whom he had not yet spoken to) should favour him, he might be in a position to ignore the vagaries of all charwomen. He was, in fact, a very great practical philosopher, tenacious—it is true—in his ideas, but, nevertheless, profoundly aware of the wisdom of compromising with destiny.

Twenty-one years earlier he had been a placid and happy clerk in an insurance office, anticipating an existence devoted wholly to fire-risks. Destiny had sent him one evening to his uncle, T. T. Riceyman, in Riceyman Steps, and into the very room where he was now tapping. Riceyman took to him, seeing in the young man a resemblance to himself. Riceyman began to talk about his well-loved Clerkenwell, and especially about what was for him the marvellous outstanding event in the Clerkenwell history—namely, the construction of the Underground Railway from Clerkenwell to Euston Square. Henry had never forgotten the old man's almost melodramatic recital, so full of astonishing and quaint incidents.

The old man swore that exactly one thousand lawyers had signed a petition in favour of the line, and exactly one thousand butchers had signed another similar petition. All Clerkenwell was mad for the line. But when the construction began all Clerkenwell trembled. The earth opened in the most unexpected and undesirable places. Streets had to be barred to horse traffic; pavements resembled switchbacks. Hundreds of houses had to be propped, and along the line of the tunnel itself scores of houses were suddenly vacated lest they should bury their occupants. The sacred workhouse came near to dissolution, and was only saved by inconceivable timberings. The still more sacred Cobham's Head public-house was first shaken and torn with cracks and then inundated by the bursting of the New River main, and the landlady died of shock. The thousand lawyers and the thousand butchers wished they had never humbly prayed for the accursed line. And all this was as naught compared to the culminating catastrophe. There was a vast excavation at the mouth of the tunnel near Clerkenwell Green. It was supported by enormous brick piers and by scaffoldings erected upon the most prodigious beams that the wood trade could produce. One night—a

spring Sunday in 1862, the year of the Second Great Exhibition—the adjacent earth was observed to be gently sinking, and then some cellars filled with foul water. Alarm was raised. Railway officials and metropolitan officers rushed together, and for three days and three nights laboured to avert a supreme calamity. Huge dams were built to strengthen the subterranean masonry; nothing was left undone. Vain effort! On the Wednesday the pavements sank definitely. The earth quaked. The entire populace fled to survey the scene of horror from safety. The terrific scaffolding and beams were flung like firewood into the air and fell with awful crashes. The populace screamed at the thought of workmen entombed and massacred. A silence! Then the great brick piers, fifty feet in height, moved bodily. The whole bottom of the excavation moved in one mass. A dark and fetid liquid appeared, oozing, rolling, surging, smashing everything in its resistless track, and rushed into the mouth of the new tunnel. The crown of the arch of the mighty Fleet sewer had broken. Men wept at the enormity and completeness of the disaster... . But the Underground Railway was begun afresh and finished and grandly inaugurated, and at first the public fought for seats in its trains, and then could not be persuaded to enter its trains because they were uninhabitable, and so on and so on... .

Old fat Riceyman told his tale with such force and fire that he had a stroke. In foolishly trying to lift the man Henry had slipped and hurt his knee. The next morning Riceyman was dead. Henry inherited. A strange episode, but not stranger than thousands of episodes in the lives of plain people. Henry knew nothing of book-selling. He learnt. His philosophic placidity helped him. He had assistants, one after another, but liked none of them. When the last one went to the Great War, Henry gave him no successor. He "managed"—and in addition did earnest, sleep-denying work as a limping special constable. And now, in 1919, here he was, an institution.

He heard a footstep, and in the gloom of his shop made out the surprising apparition of his charwoman. And he was afraid, and lost his philosophy. He felt that she had arrived specially—as she would, being a quaint and conscientious young woman—to warn him with proper solemnity that she would soon belong to another. Undoubtedly the breezy and interfering Dr. Raste had come in, not to buy a Shakspeare, but to inquire about Elsie. Shakspeare was merely the excuse for Elsie... . By the way, that mislaid Flaxman illustrated edition ought to be hunted up soon—to-morrow if possible.

Chapter

4 Elsie

"Now, now, Elsie, my girl. What's this? What is it?"

Mr. Earlforward spoke benevolently but, for him, rather quickly and abruptly. And Elsie was intimidated. She worked for Mr. Earlforward only in the mornings, and to be in the shop in the darkening afternoon made her feel quite queer and apologetic. It was almost as if she had never been in the shop before and had no right there.

As the two approached each other the habitual heavenly kindness in the girl's gaze seemed to tranquillize Mr. Earlforward, who knew intimately her expression and her disposition. And though he was still disturbed by apprehension he found, as usual, a mysterious comfort in her presence; and this influence of hers exercised itself even upon his fear of losing her for ever. A strange, exciting emotional equilibrium became established in the twilight of the shop.

Elsie was a strongly-built wench, plump, fairly tall, with the striking free, powerful carriage of one bred to various and hard manual labour. Her arms and bust were superb. She had blue-black hair and dark blue eyes, and a pretty curve of the lips. The face was square but soft. From the constant drawing together of the eyebrows into a pucker of the forehead, and the dropping of the corners of the large mouth, it could be deduced that she was, if anything, over-conscientious, with a tendency to worry about the right performance of her duty; but this warping of her features was too slight to be unpleasant; it was, indeed, a reassurance. She was twenty-three years of age; solitude, adversity and deprivation made her look older. For four years she had been a widow, childless, after two nights of marriage and romance with a youth who went to the East in 1915 to die of dysentery. Her clothes were cheap, dirty, slatternly and dilapidated. Over a soiled white apron she wore a terribly coarse apron of sacking. This apron was an offence; it was an outrage. But not to her; she regarded it as part of a uniform, and such an apron was, in fact, part of the regular uniform of thousands of women in Clerkenwell. If Elsie was slatternly, dirty, and without any grace of adornment, the reason was that she had absolutely no inducement or example to be otherwise. It was her natural, respectable state to be so.

"It's for Mrs. Arb, sir," Elsie began.

"Mrs. Arb?" questioned Mr. Earlforward, puzzled for an instant by the unfamiliar name. "Yes, yes, I know. Well? What have you got to do with Mrs. Arb?"

"I work for her in my afternoons, sir."

"But I never knew this!"

"I only began to-day, sir. She sent me across, seeing as I'm engaged here, to see if you'd got a good, cheap, second-hand cookery-book."

Mr. Earlforward's demeanour reflected no change in his mood, but Elsie had raised him into heaven. It was not to give him notice that she had come! She would stay with him! She would stay for ever, or until he had no need of her. And she would make a link with Mrs. Arb, the new proprietress of the confectioner's shop across the way. Of course the name of the new proprietress was Arb. He had not thought of her name. He had thought only of herself. Even now he had no notion of her Christian name.

"Oh! So she wants a cookery-book, does she? What sort of a cookery-book?"

"She said she's thinking of going in for sandwiches, sir, and things, she said, and having a sign put up for it. Snacks, like."

The word "snacks" gave Mr. Earlforward an idea. He walked across to what he called the "modern side" of the shop. In the course of the war, when food-rationed stay-at-homes really had to stay at home, and, having nothing else to do while waiting for air-raids, took to literature in desperation, he had done a very large trade in cheap editions of novels, and quite a good trade in cheap cookery-books that professed to teach rationed house-wives how to make substance out of shadow. Gently rubbing his little beard, he stood and gazed rather absently at a shelf of small paper-protected volumes, while Elsie waited with submission.

Silence within, but the dulled and still hard rumble of ceaseless motion beyond the book-screened windows! A spell! An enchantment upon these two human beings, both commonplace and both marvellous, bound together and yet incurious each of the other and incurious of the mysteries in which they and all their fellows lived! Mr. Earlforward never asked the meaning of life, for he had a lifelong ruling passion. Elsie never asked the meaning of life, for she was dominated and obsessed by a tremendous instinct to serve. Mr. Earlforward, though a kindly man, had persuaded himself that Elsie would go on charring until she died, without any romantic recompense from fate for her early tragedy, and he was well satisfied that this should be so. Because the result would inconvenience him, he desired that she should not fall in love again and marry; he preferred that she should spend her strength and youth and should grow old for him in sterile celibacy. He had absolutely no eye for the exciting effect of the white and the brown apron-strings crossing and recrossing round her magnificent waist. And Elsie knew only that Mr. Earlforward had material wants, which she satisfied as well as she could. She did not guess, nor come within a hundred miles of guessing, that he was subject to dreams and ideals and

longings. That the universe was enigmatic had not even occurred to her, nor to him; they were too busy with their share in working it out.

"Now here's a book that ought to suit Mrs. Arb," said Mr. Earlforward, picking a volume from the shelf and moving towards the entrance, where the clear daylight was. "'Snacks and Titbits.' Let me see. Sandwiches." He turned over leaves. "Sandwiches. There's nearly seven pages about sandwiches."

"How much would it be, sir?"

"One shilling."

"Oh! She said she couldn't pay more than sixpence, sir, she said."

Mr. Earlforward looked up with a fresh interest. He was exhilarated, even inspired, by the conception of a woman who, wishing to brighten her business with a new line of goods, was not prepared to spend more than sixpence on the indispensable basis of the enterprise. The conception powerfully appealed to him, and his regard for Mrs. Arb increased.

"See here, Elsie. Take this over for Mrs. Arb to look at. And tell her, with my compliments, that you can't get cookery-books—not any that are any good—for sixpence in these days."

"Yes, sir."

Elsie put the book under her aprons and hurried off.

"She sends you *her* compliments, and she says she can't pay more than sixpence, sir. I'm that sorry, sir," Elsie announced, returning.

Mr. Earlforward blandly replaced the book on its shelf, and Elsie waited in vain for any comment, then left.

"I say, Elsie," he recalled her. "It's not raining much, but it might soon. As you're here, you'd better help me in with the stand. That'll save me taking the books out before it's moved, and it'll save you trouble in the morning."

"Yes, sir," Elsie eagerly agreed.

One at either end of it, they lugged within the heavy bookstand that stretched along the length of the window on the flagstones outside the shop. The books showed scarcely a trace of the drizzle.

"Thank you, Elsie."

"Don't mention it, sir."

Mr. Earlforward switched on one electric light in the middle of the shop, switched off the light in his den, and lit a candle there. Then he took a thermos flask, a cup, and two slices of bread on a plate from the interior of the grandfather's clock, poured steaming tea into the cup, and enjoyed his evening meal. When the bell of St. Andrew's jangled six, he shut and darkened the shop. The war habit of closing early suited him very well for several reasons. Then, blowing out the candle, he began again to burn electricity in the den, and tapped slowly and moved to and fro with deliberation, examining book-titles, tapping out lists, tapping out addresses on envelopes, licking stamps, and performing

other pleasant little tasks of routine. And all the time he dwelt with exquisite pleasure on the bodily appearance and astonishing moral characteristics of Mrs. Arb. What a woman! He had been right about that woman from the first glance. She was a woman in a million.

At a quarter to seven he put his boots on and collected his letters for the post. But before leaving to go to the post he suddenly thought of a ten-shilling Treasury note received from Dr. Raste, and took it from his waistcoat pocket. It was a beautiful new note, a delicate object, carefully folded by someone who understood that new notes deserve good treatment. He put it, with other less brilliant cash, into the safe. As he departed from the shop for the post office at Mount Pleasant, he picked out "Snacks and Titbits" from its shelf again, and slipped it into his side-pocket.

The rain had ceased. He inhaled the fresh, damp air with an innocent and genuine delight. Mrs. Arb's shop was the sole building illuminated in Riceyman Steps; it looked warm and feminine; it attracted. The church rose darkly, a formidable mass, in the opening at the top of the steps. The little group of dwelling-houses next to his own establishment showed not a sign of life; they seldom did; he knew nothing of their tenants, and felt absolutely no curiosity concerning them. His little yard abutted on the yard of the nearest house, but the wall between them was seven feet high; no sound ever came over it.

He turned into the main road. Although he might have dropped his correspondence into the pillar-box close by, he preferred to go to the mighty Mount Pleasant organism, with its terrific night-movement of vans and flung mailbags, because it seemed surer, safer, for his letters.

Like many people who live alone, he had a habit of talking to himself in the street. His thoughts would from time to time suddenly burst almost with violence into a phrase. Then he would smile to himself. "Me at my age!" ... "Yes, and of course there's *that!*" ... "Want some getting used to!" ... He would laugh rather sheepishly.

The vanquished were already beginning to creep into the mazes of Rowton House. They clicked through a turnstile—that was all he knew about existence in Rowton House, except that there were plants with large green leaves in the windows of the common-room. Some of the vanquished entered with boldness, but the majority walked furtively. Just opposite Rowton House the wisdom and enterprise of two railway companies had filled a blank wall with a large poster exhibiting the question: "Why not take a winter holiday where sunshine reigns?" etc. Beneath this blank wall a newsman displayed the posters of the evening papers, together with stocks of the papers. Mr. Earlforward always read the placards for news. There was nothing much to-night. "Death of a well-known statesman." Mr. Earlforward, as an expert in interpretation, was aware that "well-known" on a newspaper placard meant exactly the opposite of what it meant in any other place; it meant not well-known.

The placards always divided dead celebrities, genuine and false, into three categories. If Blank was a supreme personage the placards said: "Blank dead." Two most impressive words. If Blank was a real personage, but not quite supreme, the placards said: "Death of Blank." Three words, not so impressive. All others nameless were in the third category of "well-knowns." Nevertheless, Mr. Earforward walked briskly back as far as the Free Library to glance at a paper—perhaps not because he was disturbed about the identity of a well-known statesman, but because he hesitated to carry out his resolution to enter Mrs. Arb's shop.

Chapter

5 The gift

Mrs. Arb was listening to a customer and giving change.

"'And when you've got children of your own,' she said, 'and when you've got children of your own,' that was her remark," the customer, an insecurely fat woman, was saying.

"Just so," Mrs. Arb agreed, handing the change and pushing a little parcel across the counter. She ignored Mr. Earlforward completely. He stood near the door, while the fat customer repeated once more what some third person had remarked upon a certain occasion. The customer's accent was noticeably vulgar in contrast with Mrs. Arb's. Mrs. Arb was indeed very "well spoken." And she contrasted not merely with the customer but with the shop.

There were dozens of such little shops in and near King's Cross Road. The stock, and also the ornamentation, of the shop came chiefly from the wholesalers of advertised goods made up into universally recognisable packets. Several kinds of tea in large quantities, and picturesque, bright tea-signs all around the shop. Several kinds of chocolate, in several kinds of fancy polished-wood glazed stands. (But the chocolate of one maker was in the stand of another.) All manner of patent foods, liquid and solid, each guaranteed to give strength. Two competitors in margarine. Scores of paper bags of flour. Some loaves; two hams, cut into. A milk-churn in the middle of the shop. Tinned fruits. Tinned fish. Tinned meats. And in the linoleum-lined window the cakes and bon-bons which entitled the shop to style itself "confectioner's." Dirty ceiling; uneven darkwood floor; frowsy, mysterious corners; a shabby counter covered with linoleum in black-and-white check, like the bottom of the window. One chair; one small, round, iron table. No cash-desk. No writing apparatus of any sort. A smell of bread, ham and biscuits. A poor little shop, showing no individuality, no enterprise, no imagination, no potentiality of reasonable profits. A shop which saved the shopkeeper from the trouble of thinking for himself. The inevitable result of big advertising, and kept up to the average mark by the constant visitation of hurried commercial travellers and collectors who had the magic to extract money out of empty tills.

And Mrs. Arb, thin, bright, cheerful, with scintillating eyes; in a neat check dress and a fairly clean white apron! Yes, she was bright, she was cheerful, she had a keen face. Perhaps that was what had attracted Mr. Earlforward, who was used to neither cheerfulness nor brightness. Yet he thought: "It would have been just about the same if she'd been a

gloomy woman." Perhaps he had been attracted because she had life, energy, downrightness, masterfulness.

"Good evening, Mr. Earlforward. And what can I do for you?" She greeted him suddenly, vivaciously, as the fat customer departed.

She knew him, then! She knew his real name. She knew that his name did not accord with the sign over his shop. Her welcoming smile inspired him, as alcohol would have inspired him had he ever tasted it. He was uplifted to a higher plane of existence. And also, secretly, he was a little bit flurried; but his demeanour did not betray this. A clock struck rapidly in some room behind the shop, and at the sound Mrs. Arb sprang from behind the counter, shut and locked the shop door, and drew down its blind for a sign to the world that business was over for the day. She had a fine movement with her. In getting out of her way Mr. Earlforward strove to conceal his limp as much as possible.

"I thought I'd just look in about that cookery-book you wanted," said he.

"It's very kind of you I'm sure," said she. "But I really don't think I shall need it."

"Oh!"

"No! I think I shall get rid of this business. There's no doing anything with it."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Mr. Earlforward. And he was.

"It isn't as if I didn't enjoy it—at first. Quite a pleasant change for me to take something in hand. My husband died two years ago and left me nicely off, and I've been withering up ever since, till this came along. It's no life, being a widow at my age. But I couldn't stand this either, for long. There's no *bounce* to this business, if you understand what I mean. It's like hitting a cushion."

"You've soon decided."

"I haven't decided. But I'm thinking about it. You see, it's a *queer* neighbourhood."

"Queer?" He was shocked, perhaps a little hurt, but his calm tone disclosed nothing of that. He had a desire to explain to Mrs. Arb at great length that the neighbourhood was one of almost unique interest.

"Well, you know what I mean. You see, I come from Fulham—Chelsea you might call it. I'm not saying that when I lived in this shop before—eighteen years ago, is it?—I'm not saying I thought it was a queer neighbourhood then. I didn't—and I was here for over a year, too. But I do now."

"I must confess it hasn't struck me as *queer*."

"You know this King's Cross Road?" Mrs. Arb proceeded with increased ardour. "You know it You've walked all along it?"

"Yes."

"So have I. Oh! I've looked about me. Is there a single theatre in it? Is there one music-hall? Is there one dance-hall? Is there one picture

theatre? Is there one nice little restaurant? Or a tea-shop where a nice person could go if she'd a mind? ... And yet it's a very important street; it's full of people all day. And you can walk for miles round here and see *nothing*. And the dirt and untidiness! Well, I thought Fulham was dirty. Now look at this Riceyman Square place, up behind those ~funny steps! I walked *through* there. And I lay there isn't one house in it—not one—without a broken window! The fact is, the people about here don't want things nice and *kept*... . I'm not meaning you—certainly not! But people in general. And they don't want anything fresh, either. They only want all the nasty old things they've always had, same as pigs. And yet I must say I admire pigs, in a way. Oh, dear!" she laughed, as if at herself, a tinkling laugh, and looked down, with her steady agreeable hand still on the door.

Twice before she had looked down. It was more than coyness, better than coyness, more genuinely exciting. When she laughed her face crinkled up very pleasantly. She had energy. All the time her body made little movements. Her glance varied, scintillating, darkling. Her tone ceaselessly varied. And she had authority. She was a masterful woman, but masterful in a broad-minded, genial manner. She was experienced, and had learnt from experience. She must be over forty... . And still, somehow girlish! Best of all, she was original; she had a point of view. She could see. Mr. Earlforward hated Clerkenwell to be damned. Yet he liked her to damn it.

And how natural she was, dignified, but not ceremonious, willing to be friends at once! He repeated to himself that from the first sight of her he had known her to be a highly remarkable creature.

"I brought the book along," he said, prudently avoiding argument. She took it amiably from him, and out of politeness inspected it again.

"You shall have it for ninepence. And you might be needing it after all, you know."

With her face still bent towards "Snacks and Titbits" she raised her eyes to his eyes—it seemed roguishly.

"I might! I might!" She shut the book with a smart snap. "But I won't go beyond sixpence, thank you all the same. And not as I don't think it's very kind of you to bring it over."

What a woman! What a woman! She was rapidly becoming the most brilliant, attractive, competent, and comfortable woman on earth; and Mr. Earlforward was rapidly becoming a hero, a knight, a madman capable of sublime deeds. He felt an heroic impulse such as he had never felt. He fought it, and was beaten.

"See here," he said quietly, and with unconscious grandeur. "We're neighbours. I'll make you a present of the book."

Did she say, as a silly little creature would have said " Oh, no! I couldn't possibly. I really couldn't?"

Not a bit. She said simply:

"It's most kind of you, Mr. Earlforward. It really is. Of course I accept it with pleasure. Thank you."

And she looked down, like a girl who has received a necklace and clasped it on her neck. Yes, she looked down. The moment was marvellous to Mr. Earlforward.

"But I do think you're a little hard on Riceyman Square," he said, as she unlocked the door for his departure.

She replied gaily and firmly: "Not one house without a broken pane!" She insisted and held out her hand.

"Well, we must see one day," said he.

She nodded.

"And if there is," she said, "I shall pay you a shilling for the book. That's fair."

She shook hands. Mr. Earlforward crossed the space between her shop and his with perfect calmness, and as he approached his door he took from his pocket with the mechanical movement of regular habit a shining key.

Chapter

6 Mrs Arb's case

You would have thought, while Mrs. Arb was talking to Mr. Earlforward, that the enigma of the universe could not exist in her presence. Yet as soon as she was alone it was there, pervading the closed little shop. By letting Mr. Earlforward out she had let the enigma in she had re-locked the door too late. She stood forlorn, apprehensive, and pathetically undecided in the middle of the shop, and gazed round at the miserable contents of the shop with a dismayed disillusion. Brightness had fallen from her. Impossible to see in her now the woman whose abundant attractive vitality had vitalized Mr. Earlforward into a new and exalted frame of mind!

She had married, raising herself somewhat, in her middle twenties, a clerk of works, popular not only with architects, but with contractors. Mr. Arb had been clerk of works to some of the very biggest erections of the century. His vocation carried him here and there—wherever a large building was being put up; it might be a provincial town hall, or a block of offices in London, or a huge hydro on some rural country-side, or an explosives factory in the middle of pasture land. And Mr. Arb's jobs might last any length of time, from six months to three or four years. Consequently he had had no fixed residence. As there were no children his wife would always go about with him, and they would live in furnished rooms. This arrangement was cheaper than keeping a permanent home in London, and much more cheerful and stimulating. For Mr. Arb it had the advantages (with the disadvantages) of living with a wife whose sole genuine interest, hobby, and solicitude was her husband; all Mrs. Arb's other social relations were bound to be transitory and lukewarm. When Mr. Arb died he left a sum of money surprisingly large in view of the fact that clerks of works do not receive high salaries. Architects, hearing of the nice comfortable fortune, were more surprised than contractors. A clerk of works has great power. A clerk of works may be human.

Mrs. Arb found herself with an income but no home, no habit of home life, and no masculine guidance or protection. She was heart-stricken, and—what was worse—she was thoroughly disorganized. Her immense vitality had no outlet. Time helped her, but she lived in suspense, undecided what to do and not quite confident in her own unaided wisdom. An incredible letter from a solicitor announcing that she had inherited the confectioner's business and premises and some money in Riceyman Steps shook and roused her. These pleasant and promising things had belonged to her grandmother's much younger half-sister,