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*Keep the Aspidistra Flying*



Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not money, I am become as a sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not money, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burnt, and have not money, it profiteth me nothing. Money suffereth long, and is kind; money envieth not; money vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. [...] And now abideth faith, hope, money, these three; but the greatest of these is money.

– 1 Corinthians 13 (adapted)\*



## I

THE CLOCK STRUCK HALF-PAST TWO. In the little office at the back of Mr McKechnie's bookshop, Gordon – Gordon Comstock, last member of the Comstock family, aged twenty-nine and rather moth-eaten already – lounged across the table, pushing a fourpenny packet of Player's Weights\* open and shut with his thumb.

The ding-dong of another, remoter clock – from the Prince of Wales, the other side of the street – rippled the stagnant air. Gordon made an effort, sat upright and stowed his packet of cigarettes away in his inside pocket. He was perishing for a smoke. However, there were only four cigarettes left. Today was Wednesday, and he had no money coming to him till Friday. It would be too bloody to be without tobacco tonight as well as all tomorrow.

Bored in advance by tomorrow's tobaccoless hours, he got up and moved towards the door – a small, frail figure, with delicate bones and fretful movements. His coat was out at elbow in the right sleeve, and its middle button was missing; his ready-made flannel trousers were stained and shapeless. Even from above you could see that his shoes needed resoling.

The money clinked in his trouser pocket as he got up. He knew the precise sum that was there. Fivepence halfpenny – twopence halfpenny and a Joey.\* He paused, took out the miserable little threepenny bit and looked at it. Beastly, useless thing! And bloody fool to have taken it! It had happened yesterday, when he was buying cigarettes. "Don't mind a threepenny bit, do you, sir?" the little bitch of a shop girl had chirped. And of course he had let her give it him. "Oh no, not at all!" he had said – fool, bloody fool!

His heart sickened to think that he had only fivepence halfpenny in the world, threepence of which couldn't even be spent. Because how can you buy anything with a threepenny bit? It isn't a coin – it's the answer to a riddle. You look such a fool when you take it out of your pocket, unless it's in among a whole handful of other coins. "How much?" you say. "Threepence," the shop girl says. And then you feel all round your pocket and fish out that absurd little thing, all by itself, sticking on the end of your finger like a tiddlywink. The shop girl sniffs. She spots immediately



that it's your last threepence in the world. You see her glance quickly at it – she's wondering whether there's a piece of Christmas pudding still sticking to it.\* And you stalk out with your nose in the air, and can't ever go to that shop again. No! We won't spend our Joey. Twopence halfpenny left – twopence halfpenny to last till Friday.

This was the lonely after-dinner hour, when few or no customers were to be expected. He was alone with seven thousand books. The small dark room, smelling of dust and decayed paper, that gave on the office, was filled to the brim with books, mostly aged and unsaleable. On the top shelves near the ceiling the quarto volumes of extinct encyclopedias slumbered on their sides in piles like the tiered coffins in common graves. Gordon pushed aside the blue, dust-sodden curtains that served as a doorway to the next room. This, better lighted than the other, contained the lending library. It was one of those "twopenny, no-deposit" libraries beloved of book-pinchers. No books in it except novels, of course. And *what* novels! But that too was a matter of course.

Eight hundred strong, the novels lined the room on three sides ceiling-high, row upon row of gaudy oblong backs, as though the walls had been built of many-coloured bricks laid upright. They were arranged alphabetically. Arlen, Burroughs, Deeping, Dell, Frankau, Galsworthy, Gibbs, Priestley, Sapper, Walpole.\* Gordon eyed them with inert hatred. At this moment he hated all books, and novels most of all. Horrible to think of all that soggy, half-baked trash massed together in one place. Pudding – suet pudding. Eight hundred slabs of pudding, walling him in – a vault of puddingstone. The thought was oppressive. He moved on through the open doorway into the front part of the shop. In doing so, he smoothed his hair. It was a habitual movement. After all, there might be girls outside the glass door. Gordon was not impressive to look at. He was just five feet seven inches high – and, because his hair was usually too long, he gave the impression that his head was a little too big for his body. He was never quite unconscious of his small stature. When he knew that anyone was looking at him, he carried himself very upright, throwing a chest, with a you-be-damned air which occasionally deceived simple people.

However, there was nobody outside. The front room, unlike the rest of the shop, was smart and expensive-looking, and it contained about two thousand books, exclusive of those in the window. On the right there was a glass showcase in which children's books were kept. Gordon averted his eyes from a beastly Rackhamesque\* dust jacket: elvish children tripping

Wendily\* through a bluebell glade. He gazed out through the glass door. A foul day, and the wind rising. The sky was leaden, the cobbles of the street were slimy. It was St Andrew's day, the thirtieth of November. McKechnie's stood on a corner, on a sort of shapeless square where four streets converged. To the left, just within sight from the door, stood a great elm tree, leafless now, its multitudinous twigs making sepia-coloured lace against the sky. Opposite, next to the Prince of Wales, were tall hoardings covered with ads for patent foods and patent medicines. A gallery of monstrous doll faces – pink vacuous faces, full of goofy optimism. QT Sauce, Truweet Breakfast Crisps (“KIDDIES CLAMOUR FOR THEIR BREAKFAST CRISPS”), Kangaroo Burgundy, Vitamalt Chocolate, Bovex. Of them all, the Bovex one oppressed Gordon the most. A spectacled rat-faced clerk, with patent-leather hair, sitting at a café table grinning over a white mug of Bovex. “CORNER TABLE\* ENJOYS HIS MEAL WITH BOVEX,” the legend ran.

Gordon shortened the focus of his eyes. From the dust-dulled pane the reflection of his own face looked back at him. Not a good face. Not thirty yet, but moth-eaten already. Very pale, with bitter, ineradicable lines. What people call a “good” forehead – high, that is – but a small pointed chin, so that the face as a whole was pear-shaped rather than oval. Hair mouse-coloured and unkempt, mouth unamiable, eyes hazel inclining to green. He lengthened the focus of his eyes again. He hated mirrors nowadays. Outside, all was bleak and wintry. A tram, like a raucous swan of steel, glided groaning over the cobbles, and in its wake the wind swept a debris of trampled leaves. The twigs of the elm tree were swirling, straining eastward. The poster that advertised QT Sauce was torn at the edge; a ribbon of paper fluttered fitfully like a tiny pennant. In the side street too, to the right, the naked poplars that lined the pavement bowed sharply as the wind caught them. A nasty raw wind. There was a threatening note in it as it swept over: the first growl of winter's anger. Two lines of a poem struggled for birth in Gordon's mind.

Sharply the something wind – for instance, threatening wind? No, better: menacing wind. The menacing wind blows over – no, sweeps over, say.

The something poplars – yielding poplars? No, better: bending poplars. Assonance between bending and menacing? No matter. The bending poplars, newly bare. Good.

Sharply the menacing wind sweeps over  
The bending poplars, newly bare.\*

Good. “Bare” is a sod to rhyme – however, there’s always “air”, which every poet since Chaucer has been struggling to find rhymes for. But the impulse died away in Gordon’s mind. He turned the money over in his pocket. Twopence halfpenny and a Joey – twopence halfpenny. His mind was sticky with boredom. He couldn’t cope with rhymes and adjectives. You can’t, with only twopence halfpenny in your pocket.

His eyes refocused themselves upon the posters opposite. He had his private reasons for hating them. Mechanically he reread their slogans. “KANGAROO BURGUNDY – THE WINE FOR BRITONS.” “ASTHMA WAS CHOKING HER!” “QT SAUCE KEEPS HUBBY SMILING.” “HIKE ALL DAY ON A SLAB OF VITAMALT!” “CURVE CUT – THE SMOKE FOR OUTDOOR MEN.” “KIDDIES CLAMOUR FOR THEIR BREAKFAST CRISPS.” “CORNER TABLE ENJOYS HIS MEAL WITH BOVEX.”

Ha! A customer – potential, at any rate. Gordon stiffened himself. Standing by the door, you could get an oblique view out of the front window without being seen yourself. He looked the potential customer over.

A decentish middle-aged man, black suit, bowler hat, umbrella and dispatch case – provincial solicitor or town clerk – keeking at the window with large, pale-coloured eyes. He wore a guilty look. Gordon followed the direction of his eyes. Ah! So that was it! He had nosed out those D.H. Lawrence first editions in the far corner. Pining for a bit of smut, of course. He had heard of *Lady Chatterley*\* afar off. A bad face he had, Gordon thought. Pale, heavy, downy, with bad contours. Welsh, by the look of him – Nonconformist, anyway. He had the regular Dissenting pouches round the corners of his mouth. At home, president of the local Purity League or Seaside Vigilance Committee (rubber-soled slippers and electric torch, spotting kissing couples along the beach parade), and now up in town on the razzle. Gordon wished he would come in. Sell him a copy of *Women in Love*.\* How it would disappoint him!

But no! The Welsh solicitor had fuked it. He tucked his umbrella under his arm and moved off with righteously turned backside. But doubtless tonight, when darkness hid his blushes, he’d slink into one of the rubber shops\* and buy *High Jinks in a Parisian Convent*, by Sadie Blackeyes.\*

Gordon turned away from the door and back to the bookshelves. In the shelves to your left, as you came out of the library, the new and nearly new books were kept – a patch of bright colour that was meant to catch the eye of anyone glancing through the glass door. Their sleek, unspotted backs seemed to yearn at you from the shelves. “Buy me, buy me!” they seemed to be saying. Novels fresh from the press – still unravished brides,\* pining

for the paper-knife to deflower them\* – and review copies, like youthful widows, blooming still though virgin no longer – and here and there, in sets of half a dozen, those pathetic spinster things, “remainders”, still guarding hopefully their long-preserv’d virginity. Gordon turned his eyes away from the “remainders”. They called up evil memories. The single wretched little book that he himself had published, two years ago, had sold exactly a hundred and fifty-three copies and then been “remaindered” – and even as a “remainder” it hadn’t sold. He passed the new books by and paused in front of the shelves which ran at right angles to them and which contained more second-hand books.

Over to the right were shelves of poetry. Those in front of him were prose, a miscellaneous lot. Upwards and downwards they were graded, from clean and expensive at eye level to cheap and dingy at top and bottom. In all bookshops there goes on a savage Darwinian struggle in which the works of living men gravitate to eye level and the works of dead men go up or down – down to Gehenna or up to the throne,\* but always away from any position where they will be noticed. Down in the bottom shelves the “classics”, the extinct monsters of the Victorian age, were quietly rotting. Scott, Carlyle, Meredith, Ruskin, Pater, Stevenson\* – you could hardly read the names upon their broad, dowdy backs. In the top shelves, almost out of sight, slept the pudgy biographies of dukes. Below those, saleable still and therefore placed within reach, was “religious” literature – all sects and all creeds, lumped indiscriminately together. *The World Beyond*, by the author of *Spirit Hands Have Touched Me*. Dean Farrar’s *Life of Christ*. *Jesus the First Rotarian*. Father Hilaire Chestnut’s latest book of RC\* propaganda. Religion always sells, provided it is soppy enough. Below, exactly at eye level, was the contemporary stuff. Priestley’s latest. Dinky little books of reprinted “middles”. Cheer-up “humour” from Herbert and Knox and Milne.\* Some highbrow stuff as well. A novel or two by Hemingway\* and Virginia Woolf. Smart pseudo-Strachey\* predigested biographies. Snooty, refined books on safe painters and safe poets by those moneyed young beasts who glide so gracefully from Eton to Cambridge and from Cambridge to the literary reviews.

Dull-eyed, he gazed at the wall of books. He hated the whole lot of them, old and new, highbrow and lowbrow, snooty and chirpy. The mere sight of them brought home to him his own sterility. For here was he, supposedly a “writer”, and he couldn’t even “write”! It wasn’t merely a question of not getting published: it was that he produced nothing, or next to nothing. And all that tripe cluttering the shelves – well, at

any rate it existed: it was an achievement of sorts. Even the Dells and Deepings do at least turn out their yearly acre of print. But it was the snooty “cultured” kind of books that he hated the worst. Books of criticism and belles-lettres. The kind of thing that those moneyed young beasts from Cambridge write almost in their sleep – and that Gordon himself might have written if he had had a little more money. Money and culture! In a country like England you can no more be cultured without money than you can join the Cavalry Club.\* With the same instinct that makes a child waggle a loose tooth, he took out a snooty-looking volume – *Some Aspects of the Italian Baroque* – opened it, read a paragraph and shoved it back with mingled loathing and envy. That devastating omniscience! That noxious, horn-spectacled refinement! And the money that such refinement means! For, after all, what is there behind it except money? Money for the right kind of education, money for influential friends, money for leisure and peace of mind, money for trips to Italy. Money writes books, money sells them. Give me not righteousness, O Lord: give me money, only money.

He jingled the coins in his pocket. He was nearly thirty and had accomplished nothing – only his miserable book of poems, that had fallen flatter than any pancake. And ever since, for two whole years, he had been struggling in the labyrinth of a dreadful book that never got any further, and which, as he knew in his moments of clarity, never would get any further. It was the lack of money, simply the lack of money, that robbed him of the power to “write”. He clung to that as to an article of faith. Money, money, all is money!\* Could you write even a penny novelette without money to put heart in you? Invention, energy, wit, style, charm – they’ve all got to be paid for in hard cash.

Nevertheless, as he looked along the shelves he felt himself a little comforted. So many of the books were faded and unreadable. After all, we’re all in the same boat. *Memento mori*.\* For you and for me and for the snooty young men from Cambridge, the same oblivion waits – though doubtless it’ll wait rather longer for those snooty young men from Cambridge. He looked at the time-dulled “classics” near his feet. Dead, all dead. Carlyle and Ruskin and Meredith and Stevenson – all are dead, God rot them. He glanced over their faded titles. *Collected Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*. Ha, ha! That’s good. *Collected Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*! Its top edge was black with dust. Dust thou art, to dust returnest.\* Gordon kicked Stevenson’s buckram backside. Art there, old false penny? You’re cold meat, if ever Scotchman was.

Ping! The shop bell. Gordon turned round. Two customers, for the library.

A dejected, round-shouldered, lower-class woman, looking like a dragged duck nosing among garbage, seeped in, fumbling with a rush basket. In her wake hopped a plump little sparrow of a woman, red-cheeked, middle-middle class, carrying under her arm a copy of *The Forsyte Saga*\* – title outwards, so that passers-by could spot her for a highbrow.

Gordon had taken off his sour expression. He greeted them with the homey, family-doctor geniality reserved for library subscribers.

“Good afternoon, Mrs Weaver. Good afternoon, Mrs Penn. What terrible weather!”

“Shocking!” said Mrs Penn.

He stood aside to let them pass. Mrs Weaver upset her rush basket and spilt onto the floor a much-thumbed copy of Ethel M. Dell’s *Silver Wedding*.\* Mrs Penn’s bright bird eye lighted upon it. Behind Mrs Weaver’s back she smiled up at Gordon, archly, as highbrow to highbrow. Dell! The lowness of it! The books these lower classes read! Understandingly, he smiled back. They passed into the library, highbrow to highbrow smiling.

Mrs Penn laid *The Forsyte Saga* on the table and turned her sparrow bosom upon Gordon. She was always very affable to Gordon. She addressed him as “Mr Comstock”, shopwalker though he was, and held literary conversations with him. There was the freemasonry of highbrows between them.

“I hope you enjoyed *The Forsyte Saga*, Mrs Penn?”

“What a perfectly *marvellous* achievement that book is, Mr Comstock! Do you know that that makes the fourth time I’ve read it? An epic, a real epic!”

Mrs Weaver nosed among the books, too dim-witted to grasp that they were in alphabetical order.

“I don’t know what to ’ave this week, that I don’t,” she mumbled through untidy lips. “My daughter she keeps on at me to ’ave a try at Deeping. She’s great on Deeping, my daughter is. But my son-in-law, now, ’e’s more for Burroughs. I don’t know, I’m sure.”

A spasm passed over Mrs Penn’s face at the mention of Burroughs. She turned her back markedly on Mrs Weaver.

“What I feel, Mr Comstock, is that there’s something so *big* about Galsworthy. He’s so broad, so universal, and yet at the same time so thoroughly English in spirit, so *human*. His books are real *human* documents.”

“And Priestley, too,” said Gordon. “I think Priestley’s such an awfully fine writer, don’t you?”

“Oh, he is! So big, so broad, so human! And so essentially English!”

Mrs Weaver pursed her lips. Behind them were three isolated yellow teeth.

“I think p’raps I can’t do better’n ’ave another Dell,” she said. “You ’ave got some more Dells, ’aven’t you? I *do* enjoy a good read of Dell, I must say. I says to my daughter, I says, ‘You can keep your Deepings and your Burroughses. Give me Dell,’ I says.”

Ding Dong Dell! Dukes and dogwhips! Mrs Penn’s eye signalled high-brow irony. Gordon returned her signal. Keep in with Mrs Penn! A good, steady customer.

“Oh, certainly, Mrs Weaver. We’ve got a whole shelf by Ethel M. Dell. Would you like *The Desire of His Life*?\* Or perhaps you’ve read that. Then what about *The Altar of Honour*?”\*

“I wonder whether you have Hugh Walpole’s latest book?” said Mrs Penn. “I feel in the mood this week for something epic, something *big*. Now Walpole, you know, I consider a really *great* writer, I put him second only to Galsworthy. There’s something so *big* about him. And yet he’s so human with it.”

“And so essentially English,” said Gordon.

“Oh, of course! So essentially English!”

“I b’lieve I’ll jest ’ave *The Way of an Eagle*\* over again,” said Mrs Weaver finally. “You don’t never seem to get tired of *The Way of an Eagle*, do you now?”

“It’s certainly astonishingly popular,” said Gordon diplomatically, his eye on Mrs Penn.

“Oh, *astomishingly!*” echoed Mrs Penn ironically, her eye on Gordon.

He took their twopences and sent them happy away, Mrs Penn with Walpole’s *Rogue Herries*\* and Mrs Weaver with *The Way of an Eagle*.

Soon he had wandered back to the other room and towards the shelves of poetry. A melancholy fascination those shelves had for him. His own wretched book was there – skied, of course, high up among the unsaleable. *Mice*, by Gordon Comstock – a sneaky little foolscap octavo,\* price three and sixpence, but now reduced to a bob. Of the thirteen BFs\* who had reviewed it (and the *Times Lit. Supp.*\* had declared that it showed “exceptional promise”), not one had seen the none-too-subtle joke of that title.\* And in the two years he had been at McKechnie’s bookshop, not a single customer – not a single one – had ever taken *Mice* out of its shelf.

There were fifteen or twenty shelves of poetry. Gordon regarded them sourly. Dud stuff, for the most part. A little above eye level, already on their way to heaven and oblivion, were the poets of yesteryear, the stars of his earlier youth – Yeats, Davies, Housman, Thomas, De la Mare, Hardy.\* Dead stars. Below them, exactly at eye level, were the squibs of the passing minute – Eliot, Pound, Auden, Campbell, Day-Lewis, Spender.\* Very damp squibs, that lot. Dead stars above, damp squibs below. Shall we ever again get a writer worth reading? But Lawrence was all right, and Joyce\* even better before he went off his coconut. And if we did get a writer worth reading, should we know him when we saw him, so choked as we are with trash?

Ping! Shop bell. Gordon turned. Another customer.

A youth of twenty, cherry-lipped, with gilded hair, tripped nancifully\* in. Moneyed, obviously. He had the golden aura of money. He hadn't been in the shop before. Gordon assumed the gentlemanly-servile mien reserved for new customers. He repeated the usual formula:

“Good afternoon. Can I do anything for you? Are you looking for any particular book?”

“Oh, no, not weally.” An R-less nancy voice. “May I just *bwouse*? I simply couldn't wesist your fwont window. I have such a tewwible weakness for bookshops! So I just floated in... tee-hee!”

Float out again, then, Nancy. Gordon smiled a cultured smile, as book lover to book lover.

“Oh, please do. We like people to look round. Are you interested in poetry, by any chance?”

“Oh, of course! I *adore* poetry!”

Of course! Mangy little snob. There was a sub-artistic look about his clothes. Gordon slid a “slim” red volume from the poetry shelves.

“These are just out. They might interest you, perhaps. They're translations – something rather out of the common. Translations from the Bulgarian.”

Very subtle, that. Now leave him to himself. That's the proper way with customers. Don't hustle them... let them browse for twenty minutes or so... then they get ashamed and buy something. Gordon moved to the door discreetly, keeping out of Nancy's way – yet casually, one hand in his pocket, with the insouciant air proper to a gentleman.

Outside, the slimy street looked grey and drear. From somewhere round the corner came the clatter of hooves, a cold hollow sound. Caught by the wind, the dark columns of smoke from the chimneys veered over and rolled flatly down the sloping roofs. Ah!



Sharply the menacing wind sweeps over  
 The bending poplars, newly bare,  
 And the dark ribbons of the chimneys  
 Veer downward *tumty tumty* (something like “murky”) air.

Good. But the impulse faded. His eye fell again upon the ad posters across the street.

He almost wanted to laugh at them – they were so feeble, so dead-alive, so unappetizing. As though anybody could be tempted by *those!* Like succubi\* with pimply backsides. But they depressed him all the same. The money stink, everywhere the money stink. He stole a glance at the nancy, who had drifted away from the poetry shelves and taken out a large expensive book on the Russian ballet. He was holding it delicately between his pink non-prehensile paws, as a squirrel holds a nut, studying the photographs. Gordon knew his type – the moneyed “artistic” young man. Not an artist himself, exactly, but a hanger-on of the arts – frequenter of studios, retailer of scandal. A nice-looking boy, though, for all his nancitude. The skin at the back of his neck was as silky-smooth as the inside of a shell. You can’t have a skin like that under five hundred a year. A sort of charm he had, a glamour, like all moneyed people. Money and charm – who shall separate them?

Gordon thought of Ravelston, his charming, rich friend, editor of *Antichrist*, of whom he was extravagantly fond, and whom he did not see so often as once in a fortnight – and of Rosemary, his girl, who loved him (adored him, so she said) and who, all the same, had never slept with him. Money, once again – all is money. All human relationships must be purchased with money. If you have no money, men won’t care for you, women won’t love you – won’t, that is, care for you or love you the last little bit that matters. And how right they are, after all! For, moneyless, you are unlovable. Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels. But then, if I haven’t money, I *don’t* speak with the tongues of men and of angels.

He looked again at the ad posters. He really hated them this time. That Vitamalt one, for instance! “HIKE ALL DAY ON A SLAB OF VITAMALT!” A youthful couple, boy and girl, in clean-minded hiking kit, their hair picturesquely tousled by the wind, climbing a stile against a Sussex landscape. That girl’s face! The awful bright tomboy cheeriness of it! The kind of girl who goes in for PLENTY OF CLEAN FUN. Windswept. Tight khaki shorts, but that doesn’t mean you can pinch her backside. And next to them... Corner Table – “CORNER TABLE ENJOYS HIS MEAL WITH BOVEX.”

Gordon examined the thing with the intimacy of hatred. The idiotic grinning face, like the face of a self-satisfied rat – the slick black hair, the silly spectacles. Corner Table, heir of the ages – victor of Waterloo, Corner Table, MODERN man as his masters want him to be. A docile little porker, sitting in the money sty, drinking Bovex.

Faces passed, wind-yellowed. A tram boomed across the square, and the clock over the Prince of Wales struck three. A couple of old creatures – a tramp or beggar and his wife, in long greasy overcoats that reached almost to the ground – were shuffling towards the shop. Book-pinchers, by the look of them. Better keep an eye on the boxes outside. The old man halted on the kerb a few yards away while his wife came to the door. She pushed it open and looked up at Gordon, between grey strings of hair, with a sort of hopeful malevolence.

“Ju buy books?” she demanded hoarsely.

“Sometimes. It depends what books they are.”

“I gossome *lovely* books ’ere.”

She came in, shutting the door with a clang. The nancy glanced over his shoulder distastefully and moved a step or two away, into the corner. The old woman had produced a greasy little sack from under her overcoat. She moved confidentially nearer to Gordon. She smelt of very, very old breadcrusts.

“Will you ’ave ’em?” she said, clasping the neck of the sack. “Only ’alf a crown the lot.”

“What are they? Let me see them, please.”

“*Lovely* books, they are,” she breathed, bending over to open the sack and emitting a sudden, very powerful whiff of breadcrusts.

“Ere!” she said, and thrust an armful of filthy-looking books almost into Gordon’s face.

They were an 1884 edition of Charlotte M. Yonge’s novels,\* and had the appearance of having been slept on for many years. Gordon stepped back, suddenly revolted.

“We can’t possibly buy those,” he said shortly.

“Can’t buy ’em? *Why* can’t yer buy ’em?”

“Because they’re no use to us. We can’t sell that kind of thing.”

“Wotcher make me take ’em out o’ me bag for, then?” demanded the old woman ferociously.

Gordon made a detour round her, to avoid the smell, and held the door open silently. No use arguing. You had people of this type coming into the shop all day long. The old woman made off, mumbling, with malevolence

in the hump of her shoulders, and joined her husband. He paused on the kerb to cough – so fruitily that you could hear him through the door. A clot of phlegm, like a little white tongue, came slowly out between his lips and was ejected into the gutter. Then the two old creatures shuffled away, beetle-like in the long greasy overcoats that hid everything except their feet.

Gordon watched them go. They were just by-products. The throw-outs of the money god. All over London, by tens of thousands, dragged old beasts of that description, creeping like unclean beetles to the grave.

He gazed out at the graceless street. At this moment it seemed to him that in a street like this, in a town like this, every life that is lived must be meaningless and intolerable. The sense of disintegration, of decay, that is endemic in our time was strong upon him. Somehow it was mixed up with the ad posters opposite. He looked now with more seeing eyes at those grinning yard-wide faces. After all, there was more there than mere silliness, greed and vulgarity. Corner Table grins at you, seemingly optimistic, with a flash of false teeth. But what is behind the grin? Desolation, emptiness, prophecies of doom. For can you not see, if you know how to look, that behind that slick self-satisfaction, that tittering fat-bellied triviality, there is nothing but a frightful emptiness, a secret despair? The great death wish of the modern world. Suicide pacts. Heads stuck in gas ovens in lonely maisonettes. French letters and Amen Pills.\* And the reverberations of future wars. Enemy aeroplanes flying over London – the deep threatening hum of the propellers, the shattering thunder of the bombs. It is all written in Corner Table's face.

More customers coming. Gordon stood back, gentlemanly-servile.

The doorbell clanged. Two upper-middle-class ladies sailed noisily in. One pink and fruity, thirty-fivish, with voluptuous bosom burgeoning from her coat of squirrel skin, emitting a super-feminine scent of Parma violets;\* the other middle-aged, tough and curried – India, presumably. Close behind them a dark, grubby, shy young man slipped through the doorway as apologetically as a cat. He was one of the shop's best customers – a flitting, solitary creature who was almost too shy to speak and who by some strange manipulation kept himself always a day away from a shave.

Gordon repeated his formula:

“Good afternoon. Can I do anything for you? Are you looking for any particular book?”

Fruity-Face overwhelmed him with a smile, but Curry-Face decided to treat the question as an impertinence. Ignoring Gordon, she drew

Fruity-Face across to the shelves next to the new books, where the dog books and cat books were kept. The two of them immediately began taking books out of the shelves and talking loudly. Curry-Face had the voice of a drill-sergeant. She was no doubt a colonel's wife, or widow. The nancy, still deep in the big book on the Russian ballet, edged delicately away. His face said that he would leave the shop if his privacy were disturbed again. The shy young man had already found his way to the poetry shelves. The two ladies were fairly frequent visitors to the shop. They always wanted to see books about cats and dogs, but never actually bought anything. There were two whole shelves of dog books and cat books. "Ladies' Corner", old McKechnie called it.

Another customer arrived, for the library – an ugly girl of twenty, hatless, in a white overall, with a sallow, blithering, honest face and powerful spectacles that distorted her eyes. She was assistant at a chemist's shop. Gordon put on his homey library manner. She smiled at him, and with a gait as clumsy as a bear's followed him into the library.

"What kind of book would you like this time, Miss Weeks?"

"Well..." – she clutched the front of her overall; her distorted, black-treacle eyes beamed trustfully into his – "Well, what I'd *really* like's a good hot-stuff love story. You know – something *modern*."

"Something modern? Something by Barbara Bedworthy,\* for instance? Have you read *Almost a Virgin*?"

"Oh no, not her. She's too DEEP. I can't bear DEEP books. But I want something – well, *you* know – *modern*. Sex problems and divorce, and all that. *You* know."

"Modern, but not DEEP," said Gordon, as lowbrow to lowbrow.

He ranged among the hot-stuff modern love stories. There were not less than three hundred of them in the library. From the front room came the voices of the two upper-middle-class ladies, the one fruity, the other curried, disputing about dogs. They had taken out one of the dog books and were examining the photographs. Fruity-Voice enthused over the photograph of a Peke, the ickle angel pet, wiv his gweat big SOULFUL eyes and his ickle black nosie – oh, so ducky-duck! But Curry-Voice – yes, undoubtedly a colonel's widow – said Pokes were soppy. Give her dogs with guts – dogs that would fight, she said; she hated these soppy lapdogs, she said. "You have no SOUL, Bedelia, no SOUL," said Fruity-Voice plaintively. The doorbell pinged again. Gordon handed the chemist's girl *Seven Scarlet Nights* and booked it on her ticket. She took a shabby leather purse out of her overall pocket and paid him twopence.

He went back to the front room. The nancy had put his book back in the wrong shelf and vanished. A lean, straight-nosed, brisk woman, with sensible clothes and gold-rimmed pince-nez – schoolmarm possibly, feminist certainly – came in and demanded Mrs Wharton-Beverley’s history of the suffrage movement. With secret joy Gordon told her that they hadn’t got it. She stabbed his male incompetence with gimlet eyes and went out again. The thin young man stood apologetically in the corner, his face buried in D.H. Lawrence’s *Collected Poems* like some long-legged bird with its head buried under its wing.

Gordon waited by the door. Outside, a shabby-genteel old man with a strawberry nose and a khaki muffler round his throat was picking over the books in the sixpenny box. The two upper-middle-class ladies suddenly departed, leaving a litter of open books on the table. Fruity-Face cast reluctant backward glances at the dog books, but Curry-Face drew her away, resolute not to buy anything. Gordon held the door open. The two ladies sailed noisily out, ignoring him.

He watched their fur-coated upper-middle-class backs go down the street. The old strawberry-nosed man was talking to himself as he pawed over the books. A bit wrong in the head, presumably. He would pinch something if he wasn’t watched. The wind blew colder, drying the slime of the street. Time to light up presently. Caught by a swirl of air, the torn strip of paper on the QT Sauce advertisement fluttered sharply, like a piece of washing on the line. Ah!

Sharply the menacing wind sweeps over  
 The bending poplars, newly bare,  
 And the dark ribbons of the chimneys  
 Veer downward; flicked by whips of air,  
 Torn posters flutter.

Not bad, not bad at all. But he had no wish to go on – could not go on, indeed. He fingered the money in his pocket, not chinking it, lest the shy young man should hear. Twopence halfpenny. No tobacco all tomorrow. His bones ached.

A light sprang up in the Prince of Wales. They would be swabbing out the bar. The old strawberry-nosed man was reading an Edgar Wallace\* out of the twopenny box. A tram boomed in the distance. In the room upstairs Mr McKechnie, who seldom came down to the shop, drowsed by the gas fire, white-haired and white-bearded, with snuffbox handy, over his calf-bound folio of Middleton’s *Travels in the Levant*.

The thin young man suddenly realized that he was alone, and looked up guiltily. He was a habitué of bookshops, yet never stayed longer than ten minutes in any one shop. A passionate hunger for books and the fear of being a nuisance were constantly at war in him. After ten minutes in any shop he would grow uneasy, feel himself *de trop* and take to flight, having bought something out of sheer nervousness. Without speaking he held out the copy of Lawrence's poems and awkwardly extracted three florins\* from his pocket. In handing them to Gordon he dropped one. Both dived for it simultaneously – their heads bumped against one another. The young man stood back, blushing sallowly.

"I'll wrap it up for you," said Gordon.

But the shy young man shook his head – he stammered so badly that he never spoke when it was avoidable. He clutched his book to him and slipped out with the air of having committed some disgraceful action.

Gordon was alone. He wandered back to the door. The strawberry-nosed man glanced over his shoulder, caught Gordon's eye and moved off, foiled. He had been on the point of slipping Edgar Wallace into his pocket. The clock over the Prince of Wales struck a quarter past three.

Ding Dong! A quarter past three. Light up at half past. Four and three-quarter hours till closing time. Five and a quarter hours till supper. Twopence halfpenny in pocket. No tobacco tomorrow.

Suddenly a ravishing, irresistible desire to smoke came over Gordon. He had made up his mind not to smoke this afternoon. He had only four cigarettes left. They must be saved for tonight, when he intended to "write" – for he could no more "write" without tobacco than without air. Nevertheless, he had got to have a smoke. He took out his packet of Player's Weights and extracted one of the dwarfish cigarettes. It was sheer stupid indulgence: it meant half an hour off tonight's "writing" time. But there was no resisting it. With a sort of shameful joy he sucked the soothing smoke into his lungs.

The reflection of his own face looked back at him from the greyish pane. Gordon Comstock, author of *Mice – en l'an trentiesme de son eage*,\* and moth-eaten already. Only twenty-six teeth left. However, Villon at the same age was poxed, on his own showing. Let's be thankful for small mercies.

He watched the ribbon of torn paper whirling, fluttering on the QT Sauce advertisement. Our civilization is dying. It *must* be dying. But it isn't going to die in its bed. Presently the aeroplanes are coming. Zoom – whizz – crash! The whole Western world going up in a roar of high explosives.

He looked at the darkening street, at the greyish reflection of his face in the pane, at the shabby figures shuffling past. Almost involuntarily he repeated:

*“C’est l’Ennui!... L’oeil chargé d’un pleur involontaire,  
Il rêve d’échafauds en fumant son houka.”\**

Money, money! Corner Table! The humming of the aeroplanes and the crash of the bombs.

Gordon squinted up at the leaden sky. Those aeroplanes are coming. In imagination he saw them coming now – squadron after squadron, innumerable, darkening the sky like clouds of gnats. With his tongue not quite against his teeth he made a buzzing, bluebottle-on-the-window-pane sound to represent the humming of the aeroplanes. It was a sound which, at that moment, he ardently desired to hear.

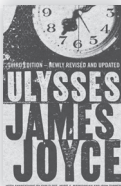
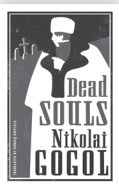
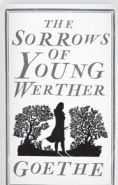
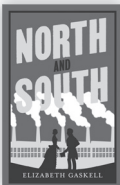
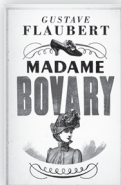
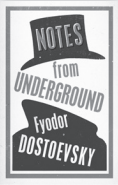
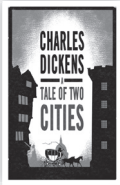
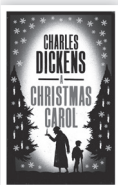
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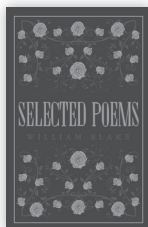
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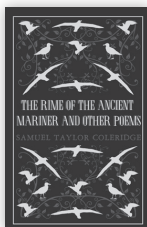
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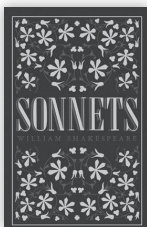
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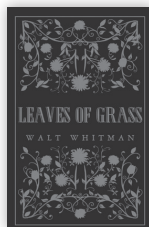
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