Keep the Aspidistra Flying

"Essential Orwell Classics-XI"

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GEORGE ORWELL

ILLUSTRATED & PUBLISHED

BY

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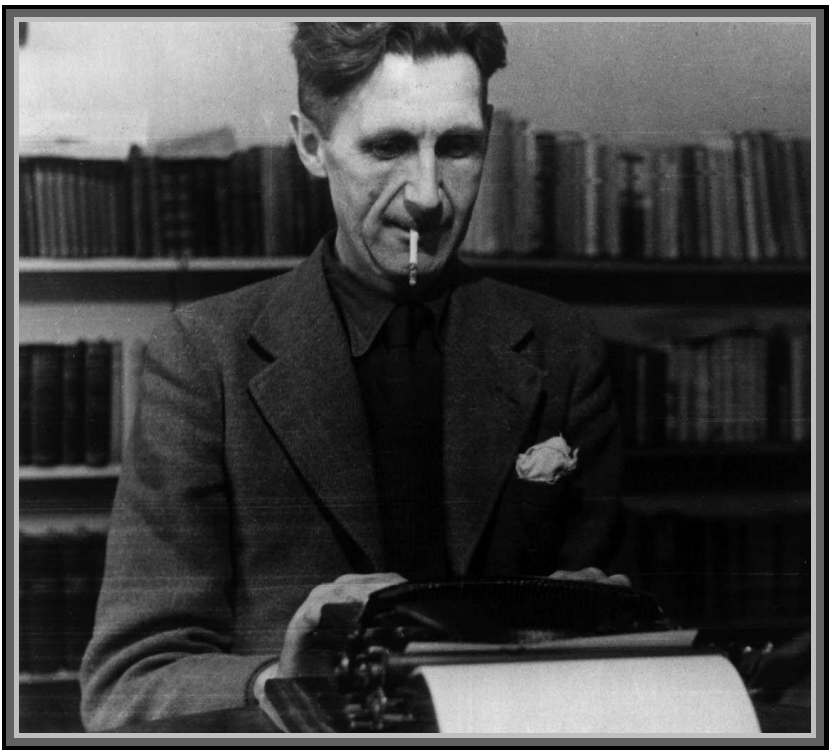
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About the Book & Author

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Keep the Aspidistra Flying, first published in 1936, is a socially critical novel by George Orwell. It is set in 1930s London. The main theme is Gordon Comstock's romantic ambition to defy worship of the money-god and status, and the dismal life that results.

Orwell wrote the book in 1934 and 1935, when he was living at various locations near Hampstead in London, and drew on his experiences in these and the preceding few years. At the beginning of 1928 he lived in lodgings in Portobello Road from where he started his tramping expeditions, sleeping rough and roaming the poorer parts of London. At this time he wrote a fragment of a play in which the

protagonist Stone needs money for a life-saving operation for his child. Stone would prefer to prostitute his wife rather than prostitute his artistic integrity by writing advertising copy.

Book Summary:

Gordon Comstock has 'declared war' on what he sees as an 'overarching dependence' on money by leaving a promising job as a copywriter for an advertising company called 'New Albion'—at which he shows great dexterity—and taking a low-paying job instead, ostensibly so he can write poetry. Coming from a respectable family background in which the inherited wealth has now become dissipated, Gordon resents having to work for a living. The 'war' (and the poetry), however, aren't going particularly well and, under the stress of his 'self-imposed exile' from affluence, Gordon has become absurd, petty and deeply neurotic.

Comstock lives without luxuries in a bedsit in London, which he affords by working in a small bookshop owned by a Scot, McKechnie. He works intermittently at a *magnum opus* he plans to call 'London Pleasures', describing a day in London; meanwhile, his only published work, a slim volume of poetry entitled *Mice*, collects dust on the remainder shelf. He is simultaneously content with his meagre existence and also disdainful of it. He lives without financial ambition and the need for a 'good job,' but his living conditions are uncomfortable and his job is boring.

Comstock is 'obsessed' by what he sees as a pervasion of money (the 'Money God', as he calls it) behind social relationships, feeling sure that women would find him more attractive if he were better off. At the beginning of the novel, he senses that his girlfriend Rosemary Waterlow, whom he met at New Albion and who continues to work there, is dissatisfied with him because of his poverty. An example of his financial embarrassment is when he is desperate for a pint of beer at his local pub, but has run out of pocket money and is ashamed to cadge a drink off his fellow lodger, Flaxman.

One of Comstock's last remaining friends, Philip Ravelston, a Marxist who publishes a magazine called *Anti-Christ*, agrees with Comstock in principle, but is comfortably well-off himself and this causes strains when the practical miseries of Comstock's life become apparent. He does, however, endeavour to publish some of Comstock's

work and his efforts, unbeknownst to Comstock, had resulted in *Mice* being published via one of his publisher contacts.

* * *

Who Was George Orwell?

George Orwell was an English novelist, essayist and critic most famous for his novels 'Animal Farm' (1945) and 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' (1949). George Orwell was a novelist, essayist and critic best known for his novels *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. He was a man of strong opinions who addressed some of the major political movements of his times, including imperialism, fascism and communism.

Family & Early Life

Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair in Motihari, India, on June 25, 1903. The son of a British civil servant, Orwell spent his first days in India, where his father was stationed. His mother brought him and his older sister, Marjorie, to England about a year after his birth and settled in Henley-on-Thames. His father stayed behind in India and rarely visited. (His younger sister, Avril, was born in 1908. Orwell didn't really know his father until he retired from the service in 1912. And even after that, the pair never formed a strong bond. He found his father to be dull and conservative.

According to one biography, Orwell's first word was "beastly." He was a sick child, often battling bronchitis and the flu.

Orwell took up writing at an early age, reportedly composing his first poem around age four. He later wrote, "I had the lonely child's habit of making up stories and holding conversations with imaginary persons, and I think from the very start my literary ambitions were mixed up with the feeling of being isolated and undervalued." One of his first literary successes came at the age of 11 when he had a poem published in the local newspaper.

Education

Like many other boys in England, Orwell was sent to boarding school. In 1911, he went to St. Cyprian's in the coastal town of Eastbourne, where he got his first taste of England's class system.

On a partial scholarship, Orwell noticed that the school treated the richer students better than the poorer ones. He wasn't popular with his peers, and in books, he found comfort from his difficult situation. He read works by Rudyard Kipling and H.G. Wells, among others.

What he lacked in personality, he made up for in smarts. Orwell won scholarships to Wellington College and Eton College to continue his studies.

After completing his schooling at Eton, Orwell found himself at a dead end. His family did not have the money to pay for a university education. Instead, he joined the India Imperial Police Force in 1922. After five years in Burma, Orwell resigned his post and returned to England. He was intent on making it as a writer.

Early Writing Career

After leaving the India Imperial Force, Orwell struggled to get his writing career off the ground and took all sorts of jobs to make ends meet, including being a dishwasher.

'Down and Out in Paris and London' (1933)

Orwell's first major work explored his time eking out a living in these two cities. The book provided a brutal look at the lives of the working poor and of those living a transient existence. Not wishing to embarrass his family, the author published the book under the pseudonym George Orwell.

'Burmese Days' (1934)

Orwell next explored his overseas experiences in *Burmese Days*, which offered a dark look at British colonialism in Burma, then part of the country's Indian empire. Orwell's interest in political matters grew rapidly after this novel was published.

War Injury and Tuberculosis

In December 1936, Orwell traveled to Spain, where he joined one of the groups fighting against General Francisco Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Orwell was badly injured during his time with a militia, getting shot in the throat and arm. For several weeks, he was unable to speak. Orwell and his wife, Eileen, were indicted on treason charges in

Spain. Fortunately, the charges were brought after the couple had left the country.

Other health problems plagued the talented writer not long after his return to England. For years, Orwell had periods of sickness, and he was officially diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1938. He spent several months at the Preston Hall Sanatorium trying to recover, but he would continue to battle with tuberculosis for the rest of his life. At the time he was initially diagnosed, there was no effective treatment for the disease.

With World War II raging on, Orwell found himself acting as a propagandist to advance the country's national interest. He loathed this part of his job, describing the company's atmosphere in his diary as "something halfway between a girls' school and a lunatic asylum, and all we are doing at present is useless, or slightly worse than useless."

Orwell resigned in 1943, saying "I was wasting my own time and the public money on doing work that produces no result. I believe that in the present political situation the broadcasting of British propaganda to India is an almost hopeless task." Around this time, Orwell became the literary editor for a socialist newspaper.

George Orwell's Most Famous Books

Sometimes called the conscience of a generation, Orwell is best known for two novels: *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Both books, published toward the end of Orwell's life, have been turned into films and enjoyed tremendous popularity over the years.

'Animal Farm' (1945)

Animal Farm was an anti-Soviet satire in a pastoral setting featuring two pigs as its main protagonists. These pigs were said to represent Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky. The novel brought Orwell great acclaim and financial rewards.

'Nineteen Eighty-Four' (1949)

Orwell's masterwork, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (or *1984* in later editions), was published in the late stages of his battle with tuberculosis and soon before his death. This bleak vision of the world divided into three oppressive nations stirred up controversy among reviewers, who found this fictional future too despairing. In the novel, Orwell gave

readers a glimpse into what would happen if the government controlled every detail of a person's life, down to their own private thoughts.

Essays by George Orwell

‘Politics and the English Language’

Published in April 1946 in the British literary magazine *Horizon*, this essay is considered one of Orwell’s most important works on style. Orwell believed that "ugly and inaccurate" English enabled oppressive ideology and that vague or meaningless language was meant to hide the truth. He argued that language should not naturally evolve over time but should be “an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.” To write well is to be able to think clearly and engage in political discourse, he wrote, as he rallied against cliches, dying metaphors and pretentious or meaningless language.

‘Shooting an Elephant’

This essay, published in the literary magazine *New Writing* in 1936, discusses Orwell’s time as a police officer in Burma (now known as Myanmar), which was still a British colony at the time. Orwell hated his job and thought imperialism was “an evil thing;” as a representative of imperialism, he was disliked by locals. One day, although he didn’t think it necessary, he killed a working elephant in front of a crowd of locals just “to avoid looking a fool.” The essay was later the title piece in a collection of Orwell’s essays, published in 1950, which included ‘My Country Right or Left,’ ‘How the Poor Die’ and ‘Such, Such were the Joys.’

Wives and Children

Orwell married Eileen O'Shaughnessy in June 1936, and Eileen supported and assisted Orwell in his career. The couple remained together until her death in 1945. According to several reports, they had an open marriage, and Orwell had a number of dalliances. In 1944 the couple adopted a son, whom they named Richard Horatio Blair, after one of Orwell's ancestors. Their son was largely raised by Orwell's sister Avril after Eileen's death.

Near the end of his life, Orwell proposed to editor Sonia Brownell. He married her in October 1949, only a short time before his death.

Brownell inherited Orwell's estate and made a career out of managing his legacy.

Death

Orwell died of tuberculosis in a London hospital on January 21, 1950. Although he was just 46 years old at the time of his death, his ideas and opinions have lived on through his work.

George Orwell's Statue

Despite Orwell's disdain for the BBC during his life, a statue of the writer was commissioned by artist Martin Jennings and installed outside the BBC in London. An inscription reads, "If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear." The eight-foot bronze statue, paid for by the George Orwell Memorial Fund, was unveiled in November 2017.

Other published books by Orwell in this series:

- 1984
- Animal Farm
- A Clergyman's Daughter
- Burmese Days
- Coming Up For Air
- Down and Out in Paris and London
- Homage to Catalonia
- Keep the Aspidistra Flying
- Looking Back on the Spanish War
- The Lion and the Unicorn
- The Road to Wigan Pier
- Fifty Essays

"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 burned, 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.."

I CORINTHIANS XIII (adapted)

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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 re-soling.

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 tiddleywink. 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 encyclopædias 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 an 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 show-case 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 exhorting you to rot your guts with this or that synthetic garbage. A gallery of monstrous doll-faces—pink vacuous faces, full of goofy optimism. QT Sauce, Tru-weet 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. 'Roland Butta 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. Foul, bloody things. He had his private reasons for hating them. Mechanically he re-read their slogans. 'Kangaroo Burgundy—the wine for Britons.' 'QT Sauce Keeps Hubby Smiling.' 'Hike all day on a Slab of Vitamalt!' 'Are you a Highbrow? Dandruff is the Reason.' 'Kiddies clamour for their Breakfast Crisps.' 'Pyorrhea? Not me!' 'Roland Butta 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 despatch-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 funked 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 draggled 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 spilled 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 Mister 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 highbrow 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, as*ton*ishingly!' 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 coco-nut. 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 *bwowse*? 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 booklover to booklover.

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

'Oh, of course! I *adore* poetwy!'

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 unappetising. 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—Roland Butta. 'Roland Butta 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. Roland Butta, heir of the ages; victor of Waterloo, Roland Butta, 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, draggled 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. Roland Butta 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