

A photograph of a bookshelf filled with books. The books are arranged on several shelves, with some spines visible. The lighting is warm, and the books are of various colors and sizes. In the foreground, there are some books and a plastic bag. The text "WALTER BESANT" is written in a black box in the top left, and "IN LUCK AT LAST" is written in a black box in the bottom right.

**WALTER  
BESANT**

**IN LUCK  
AT LAST**

**Walter Besant**

# **In Luck at Last**

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# CHAPTER I.

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## WITHIN THREE WEEKS

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If everyone were allowed beforehand to choose and select for himself the most pleasant method of performing this earthly pilgrimage, there would be, I have always thought, an immediate run upon that way of getting to the Delectable Mountains which is known as the Craft and Mystery of Second-hand Bookselling. If, further, one were allowed to select and arrange the minor details—such, for instance, as the "pitch" and the character of the shop, it would seem desirable that, as regards the latter, the kind of bookselling should be neither too lofty nor too mean—that is to say, that one's ambition would not aspire to a great collector's establishment, such as one or two we might name in Piccadilly, the Haymarket, or New Bond Street; these should be left to those who greatly dare and are prepared to play the games of Speculation and of Patience; nor, on the other hand, would one choose an open cart at the beginning of the Whitechapel Road, or one of the shops in Seven Dials, whose stock-in-trade consists wholly of three or four boxes outside the door filled with odd volumes at twopence apiece. As for "pitch" or situation, one would wish it to be somewhat retired, but not too much; one would not, for instance, willingly be thrown away in Hoxton, nor would one languish in the obscurity of Kentish Town; a second-hand bookseller must not be so far removed from the

haunts of men as to place him practically beyond the reach of the collector; nor, on the other hand, should he be planted in a busy thoroughfare—the noise of many vehicles, the hurry of quick footsteps, the swift current of anxious humanity are out of harmony with the atmosphere of a second-hand bookshop. Some suggestion of external repose is absolutely necessary; there must be some stillness in the air; yet the thing itself belongs essentially to the city—no one can imagine a second-hand bookshop beside green fields—so that there should be some murmur and perceptible hum of mankind always present in the ear. Thus there are half-a-dozen bookshops in King William Street, Strand, which seem to enjoy every possible advantage of position, for they are in the very heart of London, but yet are not exposed to the full noise and tumult of that overflowing tide which surges round Charing Cross. Again, there are streets north of Holborn and Oxford Street most pleasantly situated for the second-hand bookseller, and there are streets where he ought not to be, where he has no business, and where his presence jars. Could we, for instance, endure to see the shop of a second-hand bookseller established in Cheapside?

Perhaps, however, the most delightful spot in all London for a second-hand bookshop is that occupied by Emblem's in the King's Road, Chelsea.

It stands at the lower end of the road, where one begins to realize and thoroughly feel the influences of that ancient and lordly suburb. At this end of the road there are rows of houses with old-fashioned balconies; right and left of it there are streets which in the summer and early autumn are

green, yellow, red, and golden with their masses of creepers; squares which look as if, with the people living in them, they must belong to the year eighteen hundred; neither a day before nor a day after; they lie open to the road, with their gardens full of trees. Cheyne Walk and the old church, with its red-brick tower, and the new Embankment, are all so close that they seem part and parcel of the King's Road. The great Hospital is within five minutes' walk, and sometimes the honest veterans themselves may be seen wandering in the road. The air is heavy with associations and memories. You can actually smell the fragrance of the new-made Chelsea buns, fresh from the oven, just as you would a hundred years ago. You may sit with dainty damsels, all hoops and furbelows, eating custards at the Bun-house; you may wander among the rare plants of the Botanic Gardens. The old great houses rise, shadowy and magnificent, above the modern terraces; Don Saltero's Coffee-House yet opens its hospitable doors; Sir Thomas More meditates again on Cheyne Walk; at dead of night the ghosts of ancient minuet tunes may be heard from the Rotunda of Ranelagh Gardens, though the new barracks stand upon its site; and along the modern streets you may fancy that if you saw the ladies with their hoop petticoats, and the gentlemen with their wigs and their three-cornered hats and swords, you would not be in the least astonished.

Emblem's is one of two or three shops which stand together, but it differs from its neighbors in many important particulars. For it has no plate-glass, as the others have; nor does it stand like them with open doors; nor does it flare away gas at night; nor is it bright with gilding and fresh

paint; nor does it seek to attract notice by posters and bills. On the contrary, it retains the old, small, and unpretending panes of glass which it has always had; in the evening it is dimly lighted, and it closes early; its door is always shut, and although the name over the shop is dingy, one feels that a coat of paint, while it would certainly freshen up the place, would take something from its character. For a second-hand bookseller who respects himself must present an exterior which has something of faded splendor, of worn paint and shabbiness. Within the shop, books line the walls and cumber the floor. There are an outer and an inner shop; in the former a small table stands among the books, at which Mr. James, the assistant, is always at work cataloguing, when he is not tying up parcels; sometimes even with gum and paste repairing the slighter ravages of time—foxed bindings and close-cut margins no man can repair. In the latter, which is Mr. Emblem's sanctum, there are chairs and a table, also covered with books, a writing-desk, a small safe, and a glass case, wherein are secured the more costly books in stock. Emblem's, as must be confessed, is no longer quite what it was in former days; twenty, thirty, or forty years ago that glass case was filled with precious treasures. In those days, if a man wanted a book of county history, or of genealogy, or of heraldry, he knew where was his best chance of finding it, for Emblem's, in its prime and heyday, had its specialty. Other books treating on more frivolous subjects, such as science, belles lettres, art, or politics, he would consider, buy, and sell again; but he took little pride in them. Collectors of county histories, however, and genealogy-hunters and their kind,



knew that at Emblem's, where they would be most likely to get what they wanted, they would have to pay the market price for it.

There is no patience like the patience of a book-collector; there is no such industry given to any work comparable with the thoughtful and anxious industry with which he peruses the latest catalogues; there is no care like unto that which rends his mind before the day of auction or while he is still trying to pick up a bargain; there are no eyes so sharp as those which pry into the contents of a box full of old books, tumbled together, at sixpence apiece. The bookseller himself partakes of the noble enthusiasm of the collector, though he sells his collection; like the amateur, the professional moves heaven and earth to get a bargain: like him, he rejoices as much over a book which has been picked up below its price, as over a lost sheep which has returned into the fold. But Emblem is now old, and Emblem's shop is no longer what it was to the collector of the last generation.

It was an afternoon in late September, and in this very year of grace, eighteen hundred and eighty-four. The day was as sunny and warm as any of the days of its predecessor Augustus the Gorgeous, but yet there was an autumnal feeling in the air which made itself felt even in streets where there were no red and yellow Virginia creepers, no square gardens with long trails of mignonette and banks of flowering nasturtiums. In fact, you cannot anywhere escape the autumnal feeling, which begins about the middle of September. It makes old people think with sadness that the grasshopper is a burden in the land, and that the almond-tree is about to flourish; but the young it

fills with a vinous and intoxicated rejoicing, as if the time of feasting, fruits, harvests, and young wine, strong and fruity, was upon the world. It made Mr. James—his surname has never been ascertained, but man and boy, Mr. James has been at Emblem's for twenty-five years and more—leave his table where he was preparing the forthcoming catalogue, and go to the open door, where he wasted a good minute and a half in gazing up at the clear sky and down the sunny street. Then he stretched his arms and returned to his work, impelled by the sense of duty rather than by the scourge of necessity, because there was no hurry about the catalogue and most of the books in it were rubbish, and at that season of the year few customers could be expected, and there were no parcels to tie up and send out. He went back to his work, therefore, but he left the door partly open in order to enjoy the sight of the warm sunshine. Now for Emblem's to have its door open, was much as if Mr. Emblem himself should so far forget his self-respect as to sit in his shirt-sleeves. The shop had been rather dark, the window being full of books, but now through the open door there poured a little stream of sunshine, reflected from some far off window. It fell upon a row of old eighteenth century volumes, bound in dark and rusty leather, and did so light up and glorify the dingy bindings and faded gold, that they seemed fresh from the binder's hands, and just ready for the noble purchaser, long since dead and gone, whose book plate they bore. Some of this golden stream fell also upon the head of the assistant—it was a red head, with fiery red eyes, red eyebrows, bristly and thick, and sharp thin features to match—and it gave him the look of one who is

dragged unwillingly into the sunlight. However, Mr. James took no notice of the sunshine, and went on with his cataloguing almost as if he liked that kind of work. There are many people who seem to like dull work, and they would not be a bit more unhappy if they were made to take the place of Sisyphus, or transformed into the damsels who are condemned to toil continually at the weary work of pouring water into a sieve. Perhaps Sisyphus does not so much mind the continual going up and down hill. "After all," he might say, "this is better than the lot of poor Ixion. At all events, I have got my limbs free." Ixion, on the other hand, no doubt, is full of pity for his poor friend Sisyphus. "I, at least," he says, "have no work to do. And the rapid motion of the wheel is in sultry weather sometimes pleasant."

Behind the shop, where had been originally the "back parlor," in the days when every genteel house in Chelsea had both its front and back parlor—the latter for sitting and living in, the former for the reception of company—sat this afternoon the proprietor, the man whose name had stood above the shop for fifty years, the original and only Emblem. He was—nay, he is—for you may still find him in his place, and may make his acquaintance over a county history any day in the King's Road—he is an old man now, advanced in the seventies, who was born before the battle of Waterloo was fought, and can remember Chelsea when it was full of veterans wounded in battles fought long before the Corsican Attila was let loose upon the world. His face wears the peaceful and wise expression which belongs peculiarly to his profession. Other callings make a man look peaceful, but not all other callings make him look wise. Mr. Emblem was

born by nature of a calm temperament,—otherwise he would not have been happy in his business; a smile lies generally upon his lips, and his eyes are soft and benign; his hair is white, and his face, once ruddy, is pale, yet not shrunk and seamed with furrows as happens to so many old men, but round and firm; like his chin and lips it is clean shaven; he wears a black coat extraordinarily shiny in the sleeve, and a black silk stock just as he used to wear in the thirties when he was young, and something of a dandy, and would show himself on a Saturday evening in the pit of Drury Lane; and the stock is fastened behind with a silver buckle. He is, in fact, a delightful old gentleman to look at and pleasant to converse with, and on his brow every one who can read may see, visibly stamped, the seal of a harmless and honest life. At the contemplation of such a man, one's opinion of humanity is sensibly raised, and even house-agents, plumbers, and suburban builders, feel that, after all, virtue may bring with, it some reward.

The quiet and warmth of the afternoon, unbroken to his accustomed ear, as it would be to a stranger, by the murmurous roll of London, made him sleepy. In his hand he held a letter which he had been reading for the hundredth time, and of which he knew by heart every word; and as his eyes closed he went back in imagination to a passage in the past which it recalled.

He stood, in imagination, upon the deck of a sailing-ship—an emigrant ship. The year was eighteen hundred and sixty-four, a year when very few were tempted to try their fortunes in a country torn by civil war. With him were his

daughter and his son-in-law, and they were come to bid the latter farewell.

"My dear—my dear," cried the wife, in her husband's arms, "come what may, I will join you in a year."

Her husband shook his head sadly.

"They do not want me here," he said; "the work goes into stronger and rougher hands. Perhaps over there we may get on better, and besides, it seems an opening."

If the kind of work which he wanted was given to stronger and rougher hands than his in England, far more would it be the case in young and rough America. It was journalistic work—writing work—that he wanted; and he was a gentleman, a scholar, and a creature of retired and refined tastes and manners. There are, perhaps, some still living who have survived the tempestuous life of the ordinary Fleet Street "newspaper man" of twenty or thirty years ago; perhaps one or two among these remember Claude Aglen—but he was so short a time with them that it is not likely; those who do remember him will understand that the way to success, rough and thorny for all, for such as Aglen was impossible.

"But you will think every day of little Iris?" said his wife. "Oh, my dear, if I were only going with you! And but for me you would be at home with your father, well and happy."

Then in his dream, which was also a memory, the old man saw how the young husband kissed and comforted his wife.

"My dear," said Claude, "if it were not for you, what happiness could I have in the world? Courage, my wife,

courage and hope. I shall think of you and Iris all day and all night until we meet again."

And so they parted and the ship sailed away.

The old man opened his eyes and looked about him. It was a dream.

"It was twenty years ago," he said, "and Iris was a baby in arms. Twenty years ago, and he never saw his wife again. Never again! Because she died," he added after a pause; "my Alice died."

He shed no tears, being so old that the time of tears was well-nigh past—at seventy-five the eyes are drier than at forty, and one is no longer surprised or disappointed, and seldom even angry, whatever happens.

But he opened the letter in his hand and read it again mechanically. It was written on thin foreign paper, and the creases of the folds had become gaping rents. It was dated September, 1866, just eighteen years back.

"When you read these lines," the letter said, "I shall be in the silent land, whither Alice, my wife, has gone before me. It would be a strange thing only to think upon this journey which lies before me, and which I must take alone, had I time left for thinking. But I have not. I may last a week, or I may die in a few hours. Therefore, to the point.

"In one small thing we deceived you, Alice and I—my name is not Aglen at all; we took that name for certain reasons. Perhaps we were wrong, but we thought that as we were quite poor, and likely to remain poor, it would be well to keep our secret to ourselves. Forgive us both this suppression of the truth. We were made poor by our own

voluntary act and deed, and because I married the only woman I loved.

"I was engaged to a girl whom I did not love. We had been brought up like brother and sister together, but I did not love her, though I was engaged to her. In breaking this engagement I angered my father. In marrying Alice I angered him still more.

"I now know that he has forgiven me; he forgave me on his death-bed; he revoked his former will and made me his sole heir—just as if nothing had happened to destroy his old affection—subject to one condition—viz., that the girl to whom I was first engaged should receive the whole income until I, or my heirs, should return to England in order to claim the inheritance.

"It is strange. I die in a wooden shanty, in a little Western town, the editor of a miserable little country paper. I have not money enough even to bury me, and yet, if I were at home, I might be called a rich man, as men go. My little Iris will be an heiress. At the very moment when I learn that I am my father's heir, I am struck down by fever; and now I know that I shall never get up again.

"It is strange. Yet my father sent me his forgiveness, and my wife is dead, and the wealth that has come is useless to me. Wherefore, nothing now matters much to me, and I know that you will hold my last wishes sacred.

"I desire that Iris shall be educated as well and thoroughly as you can afford; keep her free from rough and rude companions; make her understand that her father was a gentleman of ancient family; this knowledge will, perhaps, help to give her self-respect. If any misfortune should fall

upon you, such as the loss of health or wealth, give the papers inclosed to a trustworthy solicitor, and bid him act as is best in the interests of Iris. If, as I hope, all will go well with you, do not open the papers until my child's twenty-first birthday; do not let her know until then that she is going to be rich; on her twenty-first birthday, open the papers and bid her claim her own.

"To the woman I wronged—I know not whether she has married or not—bid Iris carry my last message of sorrow at what has happened. I do not regret, and I have never regretted, that I married Alice. But, I gave her pain, for which I have never ceased to grieve. I have been punished for this breach of faith. You will find among the papers an account of all the circumstances connected with this engagement. There is also in the packet my portrait, taken when I was a lad of sixteen; give her that as well; there is the certificate of my marriage, my register of baptism, that of Iris's baptism, my signet ring—" "His arms"—the old man interrupted his reading—"his arms were: quarterly: first and fourth, two roses and a boar's head, erect; second and third, gules and fesse between—between—but I cannot remember what it was between—" He went on reading: "My father's last letter to me; Alice's letters, and one or two from yourself. If Iris should unhappily die before her twenty-first birthday, open these papers, find out from them the owner's name and address, seek her out, and tell her that she will never now be disturbed by any claimants to the estate."

The letter ended here abruptly, as if the writer had designed to add more, but was prevented by death.



For there was a postscript, in another hand, which stated: "Mr. Aglen died November 25th, 1866, and is buried in the cemetery of Johnson City, Ill."

The old man folded the letter carefully, and laid it on the table. Then he rose and walked across the room to the safe, which stood with open door in the corner furthest from the fireplace. Among its contents was a packet sealed and tied up in red tape, endorsed: "For Iris. To be given to her on her twenty-first birthday. From her father."

"It will be her twenty-first birthday," he said, "in three weeks. Then I must give her the packet. So—so—with the portrait of her father, and his marriage-certificate." He fell into a fit of musing, with the papers in his hand. "She will be safe, whatever happens to me; and as for me, if I lose her—of course I shall lose her. Why, what will it matter? Have I not lost all, except Iris? One must not be selfish. Oh, Iris, what a surprise—what a surprise I have in store for you!"

He placed the letter he had been reading within the tape which fastened the bundle, so that it should form a part of the communication to be made on Iris's birthday.

"There," he said, "now I shall read this letter no more. I wonder how many times I have read it in the last eighteen years, and how often I have wondered what the child's fortune would be? In three weeks—in three short weeks. Oh, Iris, if you only knew!"

He put back the letters and the packet, locked the safe, and resumed his seat.

The red-eyed assistant, still gumming and pasting his slips with punctilious regard to duty, had been following his master's movements with curiosity.

"Counting his investments again as usual," Mr. James murmured. "Ah! and adding 'em up! Always at it. Oh, what a trade it must have been once!"

Just then there appeared in the door a gentleman. He was quite shabby, and even ragged in his dress, but he was clearly a gentleman. He was no longer young; his shoulders were bent, and he had the unmistakable stamp and carriage of a student.

"Guv'nor's at home," said the assistant briefly.

The visitor walked into the sanctum. He had under his arm half-a-dozen volumes, which, without a word, he laid before Mr. Emblem, and untied the string.

"You ought to know this book," he said without further introduction.

Mr. Emblem looked doubtfully at the visitor.

"You sold it to me twenty-five years ago," he went on, "for five pounds."

"I did. And I remember now. You are Mr. Frank Farrar. Why, it is twenty-five years ago!"

"I have bought no more books for twenty years and more," he replied.

"Sad—sad! Dear me—tut, tut!—bought no books? And you, Mr. Farrar, once my best customer. And now—you do not mean to say that you are going to sell—that you actually want to sell—this precious book?"

"I am selling, one by one, all my books," replied the other with a sigh. "I am going down hill, Emblem, fast."

"Oh, dear, dear!" replied the bookseller. "This is very sad. One cannot bear to think of the libraries being dispersed

and sold off. And now yours, Mr. Farrar? Really, yours? Must it be?"

"Needs must," Mr. Farrar said with a sickly smile, "needs must when the devil drives. I have parted with half my books already. But I thought you might like to have this set, because they were once your own."

"So I should"—Mr. Emblem laid a loving hand upon the volumes—"so I should, Mr. Farrar, but not from you; not from you, sir. Why, you were almost my best customer—I think almost my very best—thirty years ago, when my trade was better than it is now. Yes, you gave me five pounds—or was it five pounds ten?—for this very work. And it is worth twelve pounds now—I assure you it is worth twelve pounds, if it is worth a penny."

"Will you give me ten pounds for it, then?" cried the other eagerly; "I want the money badly."

"No, I can't; but I will send you to a man who can and will. I do not speculate now; I never go to auctions. I am old, you see. Besides, I am poor. I will not buy your book, but I will send you to a man who will give you ten pounds for it, I am sure, and then he will sell it for fifteen." He wrote the address on a slip of paper. "Why, Mr. Farrar, if an old friend, so to speak, can put the question, why in the world—"

"The most natural thing," replied Mr. Farrar with a cold laugh; "I am old, as I told you, and the younger men get all the work. That is all. Nobody wants a genealogist and antiquary."

"Dear me, dear me! Why, Mr. Farrar, I remember now; you used to know my poor son-in-law, who is dead eighteen years since. I was just reading the last letter he ever wrote

to me, just before he died. You used to come here and sit with him in the evening. I remember now. So you did."

"Thank you for your good will," said Mr. Farrar. "Yes, I remember your son-in-law. I knew him before his marriage."

"Did you? Before his marriage? Then—" He was going to add, "Then you can tell me his real name," but he paused, because it is a pity ever to acknowledge ignorance, and especially ignorance in such elementary matters as your son-in-law's name.

So Mr. Emblem checked himself.

"He ought to have been a rich man," Mr. Farrar continued; "but he quarreled with his father, who cut him off with a shilling, I suppose."

Then the poor scholar, who could find no market for his learned papers, tied up his books again and went away with hanging head.

"Ugh!" Mr. James, who had been listening, groaned as Mr. Farrar passed through the door. "Ugh! Call that a way of doing business? Why, if it had been me, I'd have bought the book off of that old chap for a couple o' pounds, I would. Ay, or a sov, so seedy he is, and wants money so bad. And I know who'd have given twelve pound for it, in the trade too. Call that carrying on business? He may well add up his investments every day, if he can afford to chuck such chances. Ah, but he'll retire soon." His fiery eyes brightened, and his face glowed with the joy of anticipation. "He must retire before long."

There came another visitor. This time it was a lanky boy, with, a blue bag over his shoulder and a notebook and pencil-stump in his hand. He nodded to the assistant as to

an old friend with whom one may be at ease, set down his bag, opened his notebook, and nibbled his stump. Then he read aloud, with a comma or semicolon between each, a dozen or twenty titles. They were the names of the books which his employer wished to pick up. The red-eyed assistant listened, and shook his head. Then the boy, without another word, shouldered his bag and departed, on his way to the next second-hand book-shop.

He was followed, at a decent interval, by another caller. This time it was an old gentleman who opened the door, put in his head, and looked about him with a quick and suspicious glance. At sight of the assistant he nodded and smiled in the most friendly way possible, and came in.

"Good-morning, Mr. James; good-morning, my friend. Splendid weather. Pray don't disturb yourself. I am just having a look round—only a look round, you know. Don't move, Mr. James."

He addressed Mr. James, but he was looking at the shelves as he spoke, and, with the habit of a book-hunter, taking down the volumes, looking at the title-pages and replacing them; under his arm he carried a single volume in old leather binding.

Mr. James nodded his head, but did not disturb himself; in fact, he rose with a scowl upon his face, and followed this polite old gentleman all round the shop, placing himself close to his elbow. One might almost suppose that he suspected him, so close and assiduous was his assistance. But the visitor, accepting these attentions as if they were customary, and the result of high breeding, went slowly round the shelves, taking down book after book, but buying

none. Presently he smiled again, and said that he must be moving on, and very politely thanked Mr. James for his kindness.

"Nowhere," he was so good as to say, "does one get so much personal kindness and attention as at Emblem's. Good-morning, Mr. James; good-morning, my friend."

Mr. James grunted; and closed the door after him.

"Ugh!" he said with disgust, "I know you; I know your likes. Want to make your set complete—eh? Want to sneak one of our books to do it with, don't you? Ah!" He looked into the back shop before he returned to his paste and his slips. "That was Mr. Potts, the great Queen Anne collector, sir. Most notorious book-snatcher in all London, and the most barefaced. Wanted our fourth volume of the 'Athenian Oracle.' I saw his eyes reached out this way, and that way, and always resting on that volume. I saw him edging along to the shelf. Got another odd volume just like it in his wicked old hand, ready to change it when I wasn't looking."

"Ah," said Mr. Emblem, waking up from his dream of Iris and her father's letter; "ah, they will try it on. Keep your eyes open, James."

"No thanks, as usual," grumbled Mr. James as he returned to his gum and his scissors. "Might as well have left him to snatch the book."

Here, however, James was wrong, because it is the first duty of an assistant to hinder and obstruct the book-snatcher, who carries on his work by methods of crafty and fraudulent exchange rather than by plain theft, which is a mere brutal way. For, first, the book-snatcher marks his prey; he finds the shop which has a set containing the