

CHAPTER II

IT was Wednesday evening in April, eighteen ninety-two. Spring was coming up on the south wind from the river ; spring was in the narrow streets and in the great highway of the Strand, and in a certain bookseller's shop in the Strand. And it was Easter, not to say Bank Holiday, already in the soul of the young man who sat there compiling the Quarterly Catalogue. For it was in the days of his obscurity.

The shop, a corner one, was part of a gigantic modern structure, with a decorated façade in pinkish terra-cotta, and topped by four pinkish cupolas. It was brutally, tyrannously imposing. It towered above its neighbours, dwarfing the long sky-line of the Strand ; its flushed cupolas mocked the white and heavenly soaring of St. Mary's. Whether you approached it from the river, or from the City, or from the west, you could see nothing else, so monstrous was it, so flagrant and so new. Though the day was not yet done, the electric light streamed over the pavement from the huge windows of the ground floor ; a coronal of dazzling globes hung over the doorway at the corner ; there, as you turned, the sombre windows of the second-hand department stretched half way down the side street ; here, in the great thoroughfare, the newest of new books stood out, solicitous and alluring, in suits of blazing scarlet and vivid green, of vellum and gilt, of polished leather that shone like amber and malachite and lapis lazuli.

Within, a wall broken by a wide and lofty arch divided the front from the back shop. On the right of the arch was the mahogany pew of the cashier, on the left, a tall pillar stove radiating intolerable heat. Four steps led through