

CHAPTER VII

PERHAPS it was not to be wondered at if Mr. Rickman had not yet found himself. There were, as he sorrowfully reflected, so many Mr. Rickmans.

There was Mr. Rickman of the front shop and second-hand department, known as "our Mr. Rickman." The shop was proud of him; his appearance was supposed to give it a certain *cachet*. He neither strutted nor grovelled; he moved about from shelf to shelf in an absent-minded scholarly manner. He served you, not with obsequiousness, nor yet with condescension, but with a certain remoteness and abstraction, a noble apathy. Though a bookseller, his literary conscience remained incorruptible. He would introduce you to his favourite authors with a magnificent take-it-or-leave-it air, while an almost imperceptible lifting of his eyebrows as he handed you *your* favourite was a subtle criticism of your taste. This method of conducting business was called keeping up the tone of the establishment. The appearance and disappearance of this person was timed and regulated by circumstances beyond his own control, so that of necessity all the other Mr. Rickmans were subject to him.

For there was Mr. Rickman the student and recluse, who inhabited the insides of other men's books. Owing to his habitual converse with intellects greater—really greater—than his own, he was an exceedingly humble and reverent person. A high and stainless soul. You would never have suspected his connection with Mr. Rickman, the Junior Journalist, the obscure writer of brilliant paragraphs, a fellow destitute of reverence and decency and everything except consummate impudence, a disconcerting humour and a startling style. But he was still more distantly