

Edward stands on the third floor watching clouds drift above the city. Below him, on the street, a thick caterpillar of people is forming. The race is finished. Earlier in the day the city was desolate as thousands of people made their way to Flemington, to watch those sweat-lacquered beasts in motion, to cheer and drink alcohol. Now they are returning, buoyed and restless, to the city's heart. And, as it happens, to the grand opening of Cole's Book Arcade, Bourke Street. Edward smiles; it is not exactly a coincidence. As much as he dislikes gambling and drinking, he will make the most of this ready-made crowd.

He glances down at the street, as the feathers in their hats sway left in the breeze then right themselves.

He turns and walks to the edge of the inner balcony. Two floors below, his staff pace between the shelves, straightening a book, shifting a cane-bottomed chair forward an inch, adjusting themselves in their new scarlet jackets. The band plays a few stray notes: bright flutter of piano, soulful violin. Everything is ready. Wood glows like brass and the brass glows like the gold of an Aztec kingdom. And then there are the books. Edward—who spent a good few years in libraries claiming his own education—has never seen so many books. Anything you might ever need to know about: countries ancient or modern, fish, fowl or beast, myths, stories, poetry, plus the oldest and the newest ways of looking at the world. For a single moment, he thinks: perhaps no-one will come. He will be stuck with hundreds of thousands of books, penniless, and something rises in his gut, but it is such a useless scrap of thought that he drives it out with one sharp out-breath.

One floor below he sees his wife, leaning on the inner balcony. Swaddled in a shawl, ballooned in late pregnancy, she looks up and catches his eye. Smiles her true smile: small teeth and excitement.

He blows her a kiss and a second for the baby. And is struck by a sudden sense of his life, so natural to him, as though ordained, and at the same time utterly strange. To be a

husband, father, businessman. His earlier life had been improvised: sleeping in tents or on a river boat, teaching himself carpentry, or philosophy. Improvised and unlabelled. And now, as he takes the stairs, hand brushing the cool wood rail, he has the sense that this is something else again, some new and undreamed-of level.

They are all looking at him, his freshly scrubbed staff, trying not to fidget, or betray their expectancy. They look young, and dependent, like chicks in a nest. Edward rubs his hands together, and offers them a grin.

‘There’s no turning back now. We have to let them in, I suppose.’

At the entrance, people gather to watch the Little Men. The Little Men are two sailor dolls, their minute leather-gloved hands clamped to a metal bar which they crank with solemn-faced commitment. The bar then rotates a series of metal signs which flip one over the other: *Cole’s Book Arcade, Let the World Be Your Country, One Million Books, The Reign of Knowledge and Humanity Is Coming, Read*. The clink of tin hitting tin rhythmic beneath the rumbling crowd.

Edward watches as more people gather and stop, gather and stop, never crossing the threshold. They fill the doorway, the staff hold their breath, and time seems to waver, suspended between seconds.

The first crashing note from the band comes down on them all, breaking the spell, and they are rushing and pushing and pouring their way in on a single current of hair oil, powder, tobacco, beer and sweat. Sweat filming their faces in the warm evening. Women finding mirrors to fix their hats in. Fingers pointing at the ceiling, look, and everybody calling out to someone else, look at that, look.

At the entrance, the pushing grows worse. Several people stumble over the threshold, driven in by the force of the people behind them. Some laugh, some turn around and push back. Beneath the goodwill lies a hint of violence.

Edward looks around until he spots his manager, Owens. A short man with a concertina brow, he is sweating freely, flapping his hands at the entrance, as though to widen it by gesture. Edward waves him over.

‘The medals, Owens. Quick.’

Button-sized and made of copper, the medals were intended as a gift for his first customers. Each one bearing its own uplifting message: *The federation of the world is coming, All men are brothers, Dare to do right, The people everywhere that we do not know are as nice as the ones we do.* D’Ama had rolled his eyes on seeing them, warned him not to scare people before they’d bought something.

As soon as Owens returns, Edward calls over a couple of the younger staff, long-limbed and awkward, and uses them to form a barricade at the door.

‘Due to the popularity of the Arcade,’ he calls out to the crowd, ‘an admission of threepence will be charged for entry and a token issued.’ He watches their faces, wondering will he lose them. ‘This token can then be redeemed at the Arcade at any time, to the value of threepence.’

A sudden tornado of sound: they are cheering. Actually cheering the news that they must pay to come in. Waiting for their turn to enter. The pushing and jostling has all but stopped.

And D’Ama had said he would never give these medals away.

Edward dips his hand into the bag of cold medallions and laughs.