

Bartleby the Scrivener

Adapted from Herman Melville



My other two clerks were wonderfully loud. Turkey was a stout, short man who worked splendidly in the morning. But by midday, his round face blazed like hot Christmas coals, and he fiercely splashed darkness everywhere. Nippers, my second clerk, was sharp and terribly irritable. He constantly ground his teeth, grumbling about the height of his tall wooden desk. Behind his high green screen, Bartleby ignored their noisy fuss entirely. He seemed to whisper to the dusty air: **I would prefer not to.**

Find 2 tiny red ladybugs marching across the spilled ink.

I felt quite lucky to have such a steady worker. Bartleby gorged himself on my documents, his scratching pen racing across the thick paper without a single pause. He seemed just like a pale plaster statue, completely untouched by the world. But a stubborn quiet brewed behind his screen, waiting for the proper moment to speak: **I would prefer not to.**

Can you spot 3 tiny red ladybugs tucked behind Turkey's blazing face?

On his third day, I needed to check a freshly copied document. I sat squarely at my heavy mahogany desk, thrust out the stiff paper, and called for my new clerk. I fully expected him to bounce to his feet. Instead, from behind his tall green folding screen, his flute-like voice drifted out: **I would prefer not to.**

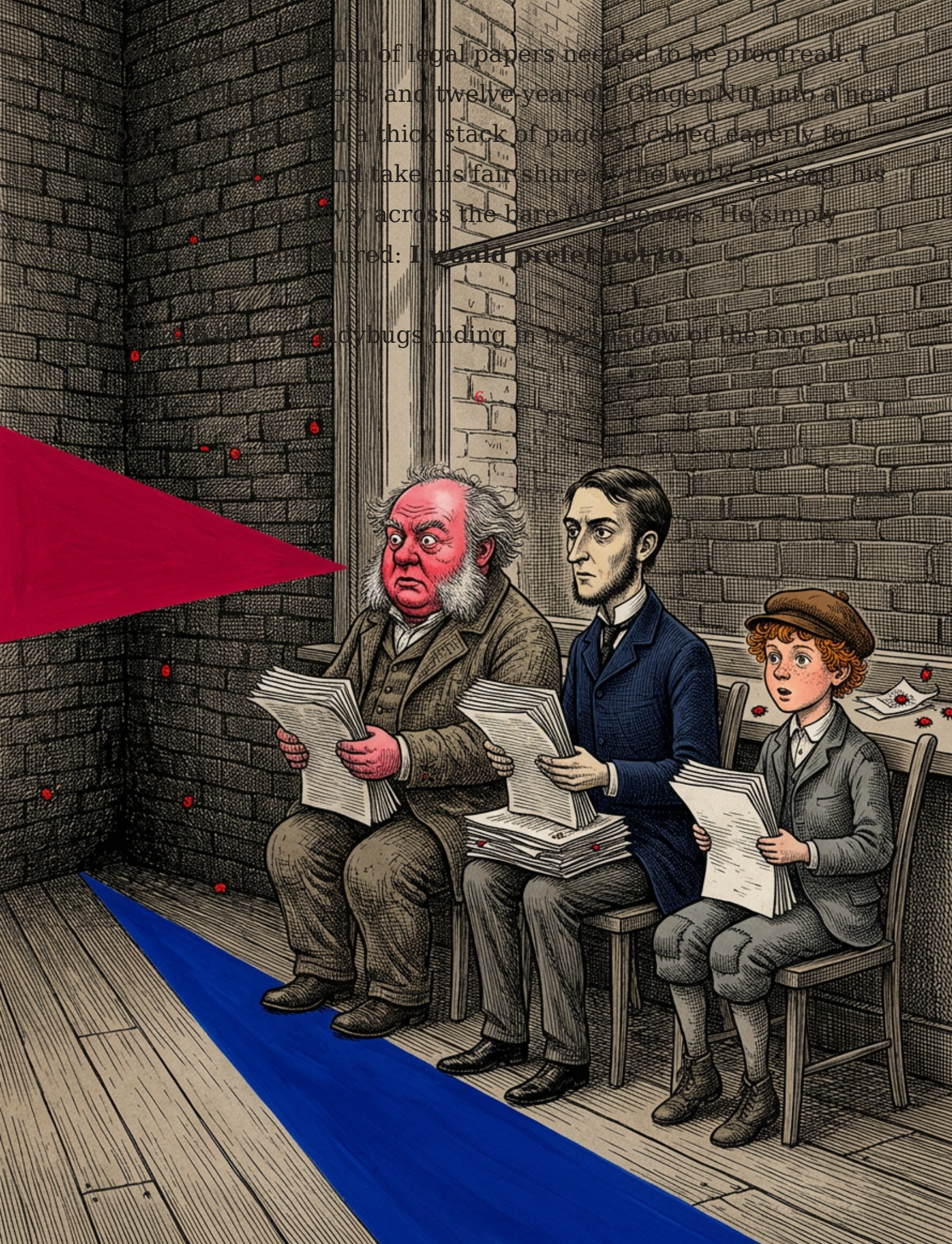
Look closely! Can you find 4 tiny red ladybugs hidden near my desk?

4

I sat in stunned silence, wondering if my old ears had played a trick. I asked him again, pitching my voice much louder and clearer. But his lean, pale face remained perfectly still behind his wooden barrier. Not a single wrinkle of worry crossed his forehead as he repeated his gentle refusal: **I would prefer not to.**

Search the high green screen. Do you see 5 tiny red ladybugs?





I marched directly toward his hermitage, demanding a proper reason. This was his very own work we were checking! Every copyist is bound by common sense to help examine his copies. But his gray eyes were calmly empty. He stood as motionless as a marble bust of Cicero, softly replying: **I would prefer not to.**

Can you spot 7 tiny red ladybugs disguised around Nippers's messy desk?

My patience stretched thin, but his absolute calmness somehow disarmed my anger. I decided to try a completely different task. "Bartleby," I said, "the office boy is out. Step down to the post office and see if any letters wait for me." He did not even turn around before answering: **I would prefer not to.**

Count them! Find 8 tiny red ladybugs creeping up the tall, dark window.

8

"You will not?" I gasped, my voice pitching up in disbelief. "I prefer not," he said. I stood there, utterly defeated by a clerk who refused to take a brisk three-minute walk. His quiet resistance felt like a solid wall I could not break. He merely smoothed his paper and whispered:

I would prefer not to.

Can you spot 9 tiny red ladybugs hiding on Ginger Nut's tray of spicy cakes?

9



Every rainy morning, I slunk to my office before church. I turned the brass key into the lock, but something stubbornly resisted me. "Inside!" Suddenly, the heavy door opened a crack, revealing Bartleby in his rumpled shirtsleeves. He calmly told me he was rather busy. **I would prefer not to** let you in yet, he said.

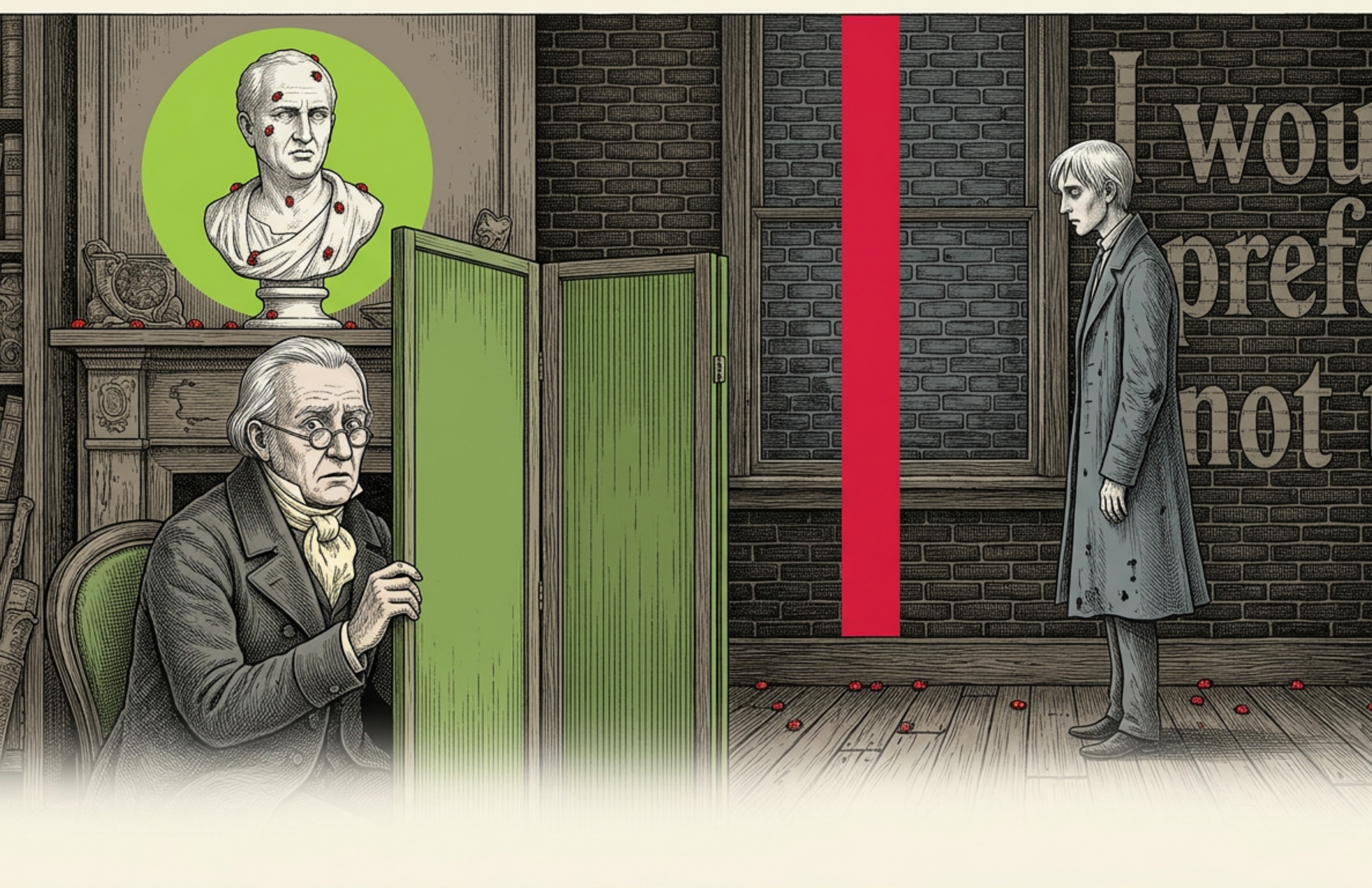
Look at the rickety old sofa. Can you find 10 tiny red ladybugs?

10

I slunk away, and when I returned, Bartleby was gone. I searched the gloomy rooms and realized the shocking truth—he lived here! Under his desk lay a rolled-up blanket, and on a chair sat a tin washbasin. He had no home, no family, and nothing to eat but crumbling ginger-nuts. When I later asked about his lonely past, he muttered: **I would prefer not to.**

Search the empty fireplace grate. There are 11 tiny red ladybugs crawling inside.

11



A law clerk who does no work is a terribly heavy burden. I could not keep him, yet I could not bear to thrust him into the cold streets. I gently told him he must leave in six days, offering extra money to find a snug new home. But when the six days expired, he still stood in his corner! He quietly told me: **I would prefer not to.**

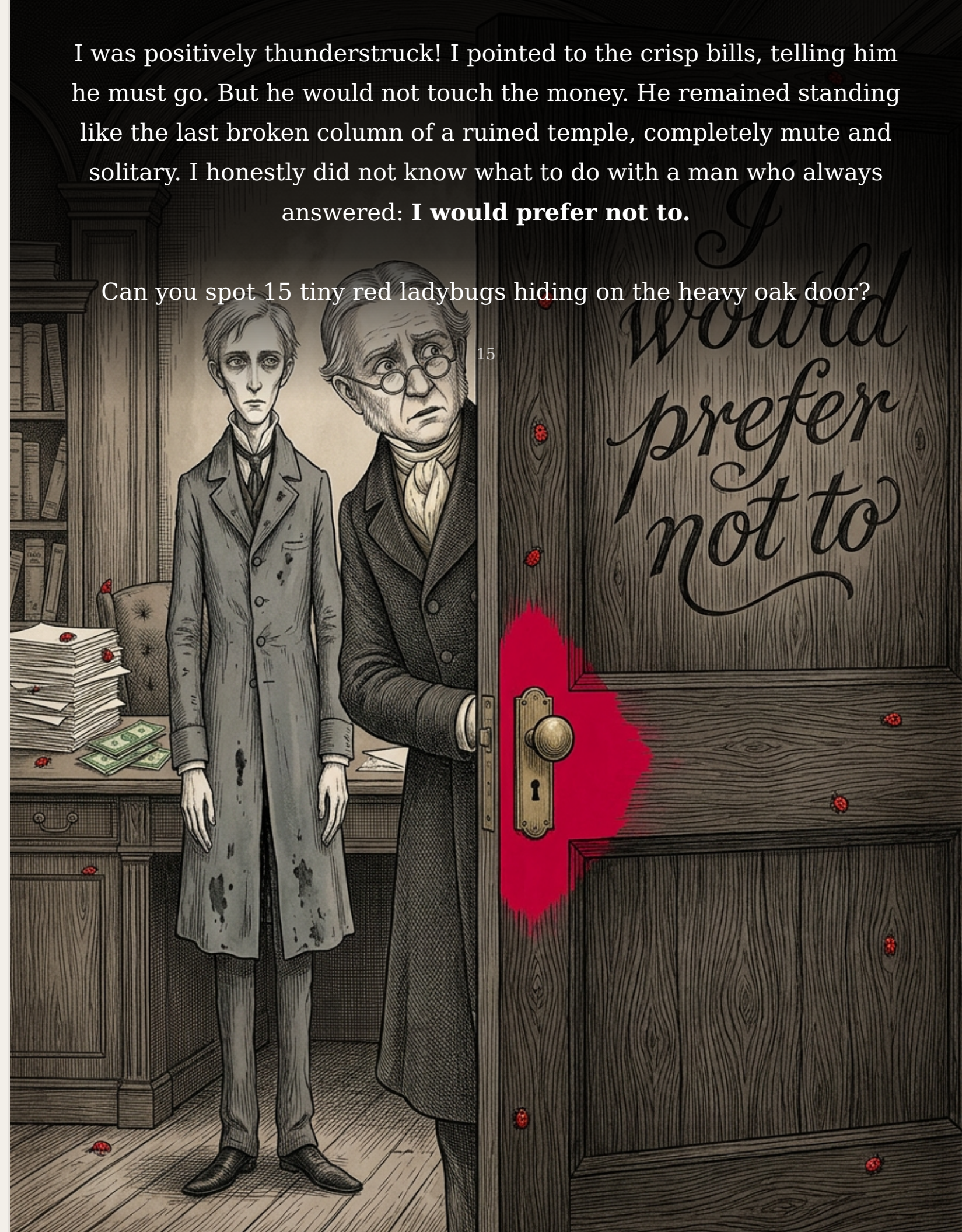
Look at the stacks of paper! Find 14 tiny red ladybugs creeping among them.

14

I was positively thunderstruck! I pointed to the crisp bills, telling him he must go. But he would not touch the money. He remained standing like the last broken column of a ruined temple, completely mute and solitary. I honestly did not know what to do with a man who always answered: **I would prefer not to.**

Can you spot 15 tiny red ladybugs hiding on the heavy oak door?

15





Since Mr. Newman had been so good, I pressed him an extraordinary. I would move my entire law practice to a different building. I was so busy that I could not even find time to move the mahogany desks, the chairs, or the heavy ledgers. Only Bartleby's high screen remained. When they folded it away, he stood alone in the naked room, whispering, **I would prefer not to.**

Search the bare shelves. Find 16 tiny red ladybugs left behind.

16

I lingered at the door, my heart beating with nervous dread. I pressed silver coins into his hand, but they clattered straight to the floorboards. I had to force myself to turn away and leave him there. As I scurried down the dark stairs, the cold, empty office seemed to echo with his quiet words: **I would prefer not to.**

Count them! There are 17 tiny red ladybugs on the movers' wooden cart.

17

My peace did not last very long. A few days later, the landlord of my old building burst into my new office! He declared that Bartleby stubbornly refused to leave. The pale clerk was sitting upon the banisters by day and sleeping in the drafty hallway by night. When I rushed back to see him, Bartleby mildly said: **I would prefer not to.**

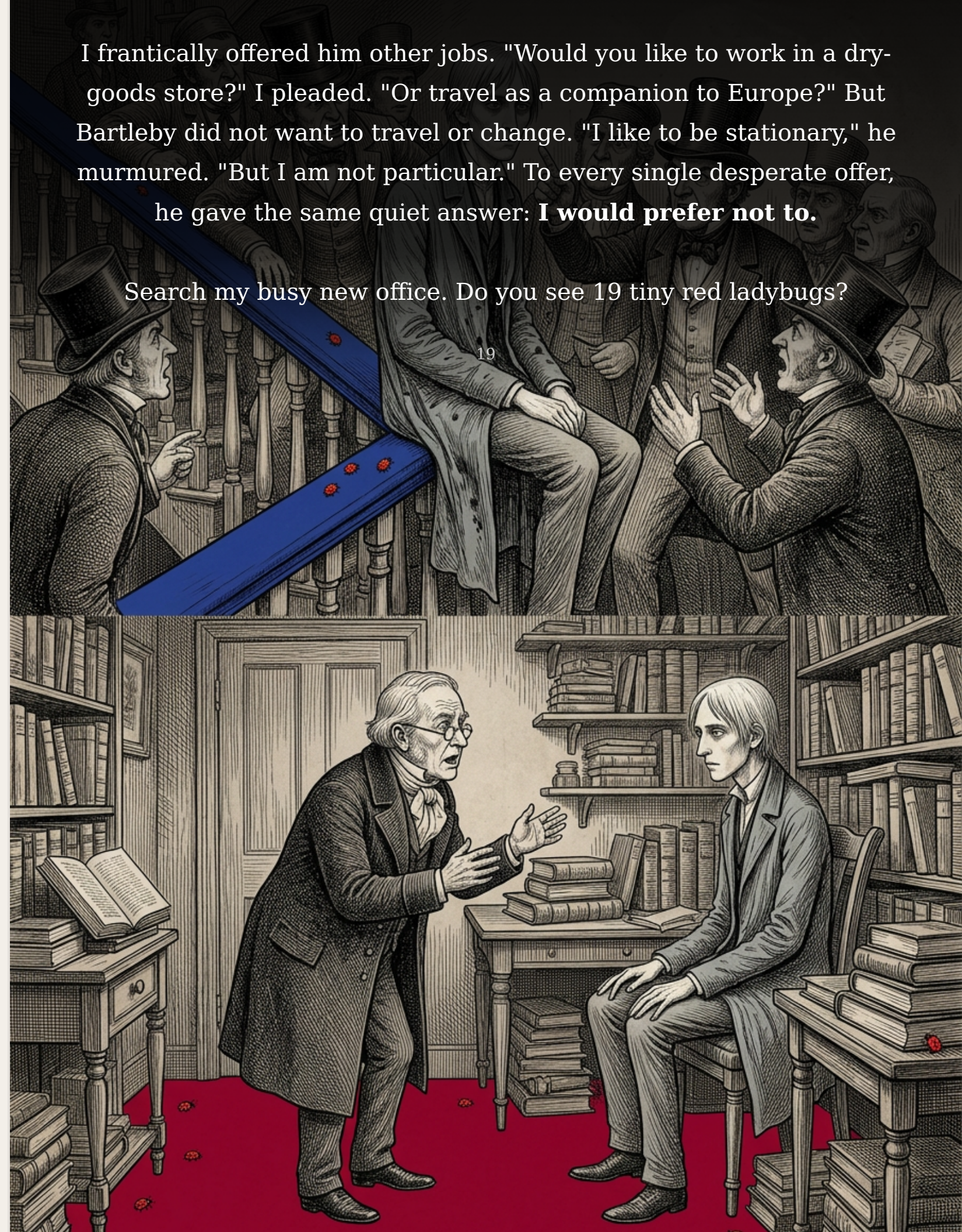
Look closely at the stairs. Can you find 18 tiny red ladybugs on the banister?

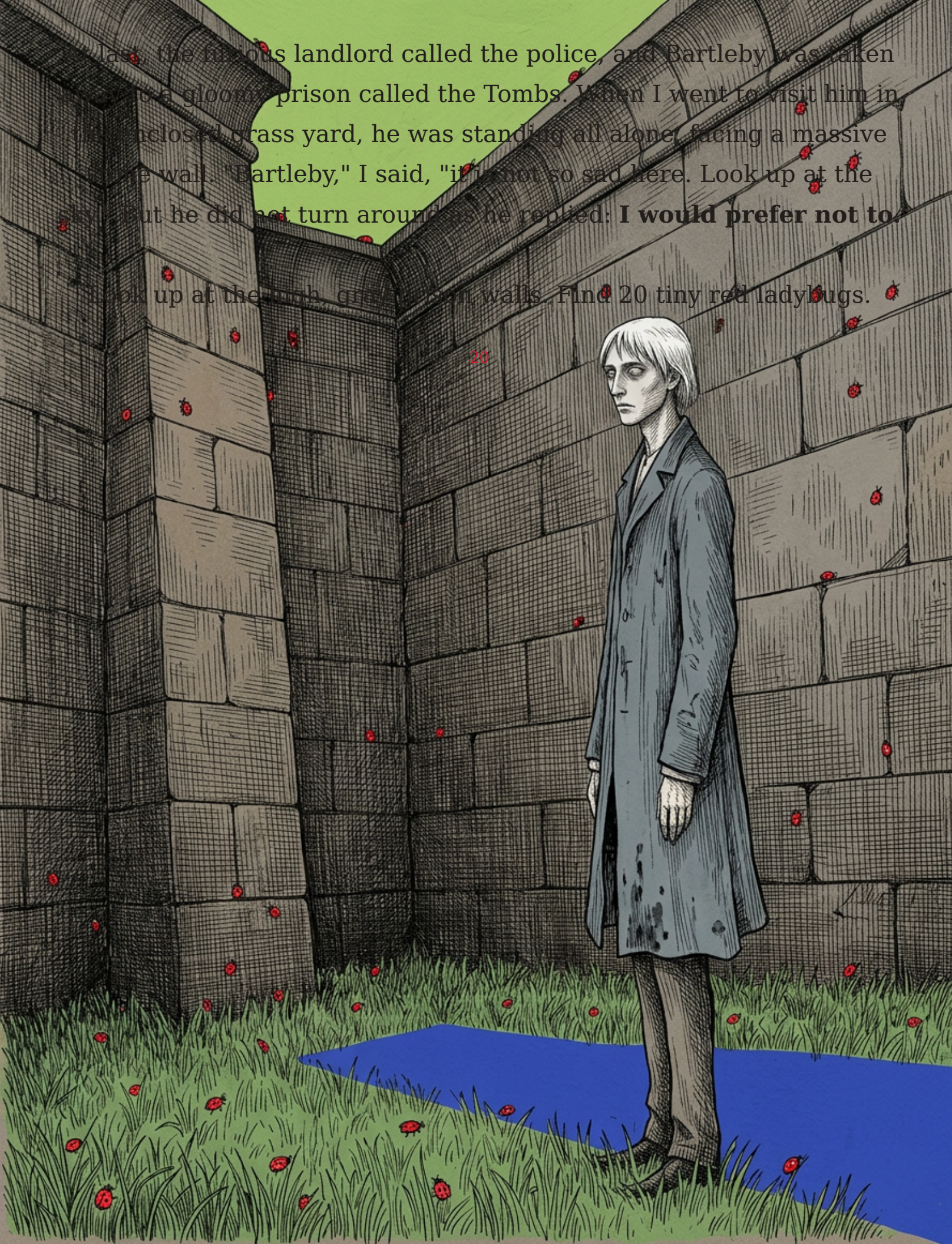
18

I frantically offered him other jobs. "Would you like to work in a dry-goods store?" I pleaded. "Or travel as a companion to Europe?" But Bartleby did not want to travel or change. "I like to be stationary," he murmured. "But I am not particular." To every single desperate offer, he gave the same quiet answer: **I would prefer not to.**

Search my busy new office. Do you see 19 tiny red ladybugs?

19





At last, the furious landlord called the police, and Bartleby was taken away to a gloomy prison called the Tombs. When I went to visit him in the enclosed grass yard, he was standing all alone, facing a massive stone wall. "Bartleby," I said, "it is not so sad here. Look up at the sky." But he did not turn around as he replied: **I would prefer not to.**

Look up at the high, grey stone walls. Find 20 tiny red ladybugs.

20

He knew exactly where he was, yet he remained perfectly calm. I swore I had not wanted him brought to this dreadful place. But he only stared at the thick, cold stones, refusing to speak another word. The giant walls seemed to swallow his final, silent defense: **I would prefer not to.**

Can you spot 21 tiny red ladybugs crawling through the quiet green grass?

21

The broad, heavy-set prison grub-man, Mr. Cutlets, wanted to help. I slipped him some silver coins and begged him to bring Bartleby the finest roasted dinner. But when we offered him the warm food, Bartleby turned his head away. "I prefer not to dine today," he said softly. "It would disagree with me." He drifted away, whispering: **I would prefer not to.**

Search Mr. Cutlets's white apron. Count 22 tiny red ladybugs!

22

He would not eat, and he would not speak. Days crawled by, and he spent all his time standing in the quietest yard, gazing blindly at the dead-wall. His body grew thinner and thinner. Yet, his quiet, stubborn spirit remained completely unbroken as he murmured his final, gentle refrain: **I would prefer not to.**

Look at the dark stone arches. Can you find 23 tiny red ladybugs?

23

