SIX LIVES

Lavie Tidhar

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Head of Zeus
First Floor East
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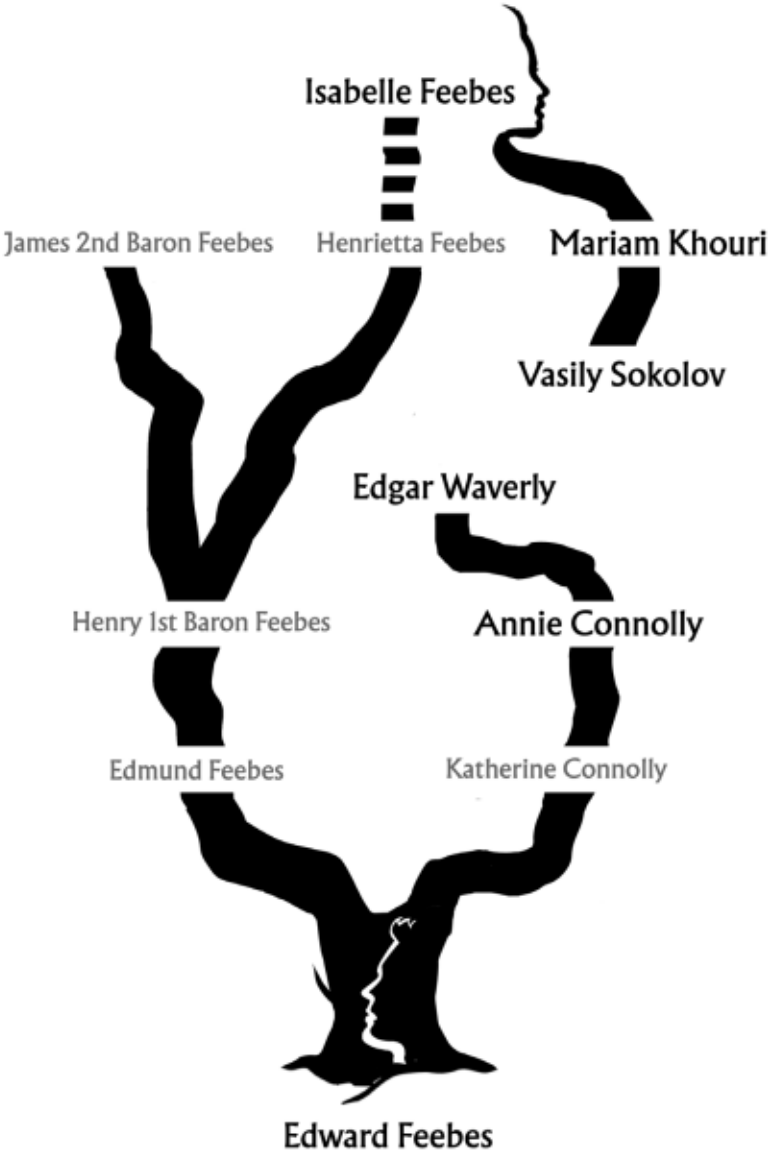
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PART ONE

THE GUANO MERCHANTS

Edward

1855

1

Edward couldn't see London yet but he could smell it: the unpleasant effluvia drifted downriver thick with smoke, rot and perfume, and a lone seagull cried overhead above the crow's nest as though startled by it. The bird traced a long parabola in the sky and flew back towards the estuary and the distant sea.

The ship sailed gracefully enough along the Thames. Edward did not much care for ships. He often suffered seasickness. The irony of the terms of his employment for the House of Feebes did not escape him, for they often required long sea voyages. He would be glad to be on dry land again.

The approach to London was thick with other ships. Edward stood on deck, under the billowing sails, and watched warships and trade ships, frigates and trawlers and clippers, and somewhere along the south bank a giant iron monster, one of the new steamers being built. Edward clutched a handkerchief to his face, the cloth soaked in Mrs Winslow's Soothing Syrup, which he took to ease his disposition on board ship. Breathing the faint aroma of laudanum helped his nerves, though did little to temper

the London stench, which grew by degrees as the ship approached the docks.

Before you saw the city you saw the cloud that hovered above it day and night. Black soot and ash rose into the air for miles around, a fog that embraced London until it became one with it. Edward thought longingly for a moment of the clean air and sparkling sea of Cádiz, but that lay behind him, and London beckoned, for all that it stank. It was the black heart of all the world, and all the credit lines led to London. Then it appeared, gradually, the old summer palace on his left with its meridian lines and observatory, the literal centre of the world from which all maps were made. Then shortly houses and pubs and brothels and grocers, and always a milling of people, pressing against the banks, congregating like pigeons as they went about the business of living and the living of business.

'You are looking forward to returning home?' Dr Müller said. He came and stood on the deck with Edward and smiled pleasantly as he reached for his pipe. He had boarded in Cádiz along with Edward, and they had spent many a pleasant evening playing draughts and whist to while away the time.

'I am a stranger here myself,' Edward said, a little self-consciously. 'I grew up in Devon.'

'Ah, yes,' Dr Müller said. 'Your uncle?'

Edward smiled. 'It is his company,' he said.

'But he thinks highly of you,' Dr Müller said. He puffed on his pipe. 'You are a diligent clerk, no?'

Edward shrugged, discomfited. 'I hope he does look on me with favour,' he said. In truth, he wasn't sure what his future held. He had carried out his duties to the best of

his abilities, but his uncle was an often aloof figure, and Edward did not know him well.

'I myself,' Dr Müller declared, 'am attending a conference of the Royal Society, which should prove most elucidating. You have heard of Charles Darwin? He is a fellow who studies barnacles.'

'Barnacles?' Edward said.

'Yes, yes,' Dr Müller said. 'Barnacles.'

He blew out smoke. The ship, meanwhile, eased its way across the water, moving slowly amidst the ungodly flotilla that crowded the docks.

'My business is in cloth and wine, mostly,' Edward said. 'I do not know much about crustaceans.'

Dr Müller's eyes twinkled when he said, 'But you do know something of birds and their excreta, eh? Eh?' He punctuated each exclamation with a stab of his pipe in the air, a habit that was somewhere between endearing and exasperating.

Edward shrugged. 'Less than you, I imagine,' he said. 'I only know them as columns in a numbers book.'

Sailors ran along deck and orders were barked hither and yon, none of which meant much to Edward. He saw they were to berth next to the *Maid of Lima*, one of the new ships leased by his uncle, and carrying, indeed, the aforementioned sacks of precious excrement. Dr Müller leaned over the side and gazed at the ship in fascination. Porters swarmed over the docks and up and down the gangplanks, faces masked against the stench of the guano as they offloaded sack upon sack from the belly of the ship. As they emerged back onto the docks they merged in turn with their fellow porters, men of all shapes and sizes, all

united by a brutish strength, all swarming like ants between the numerous vessels that came to dock in London from all corners of the world.

Here were India merchants and Malay sailors, Dutch adventurers and Spanish slavers, river barges and ships of the line and fishing boats from the far north and luxury passenger ships from America, where there was no aristocracy but that of money old and new, and other ships from Peru and Brazil, bringing all that the world had to offer here to the Smoke: coffee and tea, sugar and chillies, saffron and coca, delicate china and hand-woven cloth, wood for the carpenters and wool for the milliners and silver for the jewellers and ink for the printers, and as the world brought its riches here, Britain sent back its own gift to the world: order and the law. Without it there was chaos. With it, a letter of credit issued in Natal would be honoured in Hong Kong just as it would be in London itself, in Guiana or in New South Wales. It was a world of credits and tallies that Edward knew, of tidy numbers in neat columns, of profits and loss. When he watched the ships and the moving porters this was what he saw, a great subtraction and division, figures splitting and aligning and all adding up at last, in a symphony of bookkeeping. But he could not articulate all that to Dr Müller.

'What strange creatures we are!' Dr Müller said. 'Look at them swarm, all of them different and yet all alike. God the designer had built variation into man, and given us suffering so that we might struggle for existence, for as Heraclitus said, struggle is the father of all things. I may be misquoting.' He smiled genially and tapped his pipe on the railing, sending the ash flying into the air, where it joined

the billions of particles floating in the poisoned atmosphere over the Thames. Edward covered his nose and mouth with the handkerchief again and breathed in laudanum. His head swam pleasantly.

Before long they were berthed. Dr Müller had been an agreeable companion, but Edward was glad to at last be off ship. They bade each other farewell, and made tentative arrangements to dine together once more while in town. Edward made his way through the throng of people, animals and vehicles, doing his best to avoid stepping in the muck of faeces that lay on the ground. Things were no better when he emerged onto the street, where horse-drawn cabs went gaily past and small children, employed for that purpose, darted in between them to scoop up the animals' constant expelling of waste, but in vain. The smell of the city hit Edward in full then, a rank stench of open sewers and night soil and disease, and the black fog clung to his clothes even as his feet sank into wet puddles of animal discharge. He hailed a cab and ducked inside it with relief.

'To Bishopsgate,' he said.

2

The venerable London house of Feebes & Co., of which Edward Feebes was but a lowly, if well-esteemed, clerk, was situated close to the heart of the City, and bore a discreet façade and a modest sign upon its three-storey building. It was situated on the old Roman road; the ruins of the old Roman wall of the city stood nearby. It was a sense of continuity with the past that Henry Feebes, Edward's uncle, often expressed appreciation for. London, then and now, was a part of the global network of trade – a minor backwater in Roman times, perhaps, but the beating heart of it now.

Edward paid the cabbie. The horse shat and the cab ambled on, and Edward, one hand on his wallet, gazed around him at people flowing up and down Bishopsgate, suited bankers jumping nimbly between the filth like children at a game of hopscotch, and beggars and dollymops from the nearby tenements of Whitechapel went about their business just the same, along with the food cart vendors, the horse-drawn carriages, the omnibuses and the bobbies on the beat, who regarded the whole loud, smelly, bewildering enterprise as just another Tuesday. Edward put the handkerchief to his

face, inhaled once and put it away. He opened the door and passed into the austere confines of the office.

'Edward!'

Mr Doyle, the Irishman, beamed happily when he saw Edward's arrival. Edward smiled in response. He liked Mr Doyle, with whom he first worked in the counting house when he joined the firm. They shook hands.

'How was Spain?' Mr Doyle said.

'Congenial,' Edward said. 'How is London?'

'Still standing,' Mr Doyle said, and they both laughed.

'You look well,' Mr Doyle said. 'It is good to have you back. You spent too long amongst the Godos.'

Edward winced inwardly at the slur. Like many in Britain, Mr Doyle did not much care for the Spanish, but the House of Feebes had made its early fortunes trading with Spain when there was still a blockade, and it was rare to hear such sentiments expressed openly amongst staff. It was only Mr Doyle's familiarity with Edward, based on their days together in the counting house, that loosened his tongue, and so Edward did not raise objection.

He followed Mr Doyle upstairs, to oak-lined offices where a comfortable fire burned, and was there reacquainted with his uncle. Henry Feebes shook Edward's hand with cold, bloodless fingers, but the look in his eyes was warm enough when he said, 'Welcome back, Edward. We have much work to do.'

They sat by the fire and Mr Doyle brought them both port, then departed. Edward sipped the drink and it loosened something in him. Outside the window, darkness was already falling somehow.

'You did good work for us in Cádiz,' Uncle Henry said.

He was more elderly than Edward remembered. A touch of pestilence the previous winter had left him gaunt, and when he moved, Edward noticed before they sat, he did so with a slight limp. 'You are honest, with a good head for numbers, and you do not overindulge in drink, unlike some.'

Clearly he had something – or someone – on his mind.

'Moreover,' Uncle Henry said, 'you are family. Keep working diligently and there is no telling where you'll go. After all, I will not be around forever.' He smiled thinly. 'Though I intend to remain in place for many more years to come,' he said.

Edward nodded. He sipped his port.

'I am forever grateful for the opportunity to serve,' he said.

'Good!' Uncle Henry clasped him by the shoulder. 'You are aware of our South American operations, of course?'

'Of course,' Edward said, surprised. The Feebeses had begun in the cloth trade with Spain, then made considerable sums on the West African slave trade. It was Uncle Henry himself, however, who as a young man, and prompted by who knew what premonition, chartered himself a berth on a slow boat to Peru, and there entered into negotiations and eventual arrangements with the Peruvian government. Now the Lima House handled the bulk of the guano trade with Europe, and acted as both creditor and guarantor for the government. In effect, they were all but printing money.

'Henry Feebes made his dibs, selling the turds of foreign birds,' as the popular music hall ditty went. Crudely put, perhaps, but not inaccurate. And as long as the birds continued to shit in Peru, the House of Feebes stood prosperous.

'I need you in Lima,' Uncle Henry said.

'In Lima? But—'

'The man we have there, running things,' Uncle Henry said. 'Moens. You remember him?'

Edward tried to keep his distaste from showing. Moens was a gregarious type, blustery and hale, with a fondness for brandy, cigars and the military. He had used Edward badly when he worked under him, and Edward was relieved when he heard Moens had been sent to Lima.

'I do,' he said.

His uncle frowned. 'The numbers,' he said, 'are of some concern.'

'I see.'

Nothing more needed to be said between the two of them on that score.

'I have made the arrangements,' Uncle Henry said. 'The *Wanderer*, out of Liverpool. She departs the day after tomorrow. You can travel north by train. Spend tonight in London, dine well, rest. It is a long journey to Lima.'

'Of course,' Edward said.

'Good man,' Uncle Henry said.

Edward sipped his port.

There had been much to arrange, papers to sign and packages entrusted to his keeping until Lima. He had so recently decamped off-ship and in truth was none too keen on undertaking a long sea voyage again. He had hoped for a position back in the London House.

And yet…

And yet he could not deny this was an opportunity, as

Uncle Henry had made clear. This was responsibility, and Edward was flattered that it was entrusted to him. There were clear prospects in his going, and a young, ambitious man would be a fool to turn down such a task. It was from Peru that much of their fortune came, and nothing could be allowed to harm that flow of money across the ocean. If Moens was indeed negligent in his duties, that must be uncovered, and then dealt with promptly. Yes. And he had never been to the Americas, either, he thought. It would be beneficial to gain experience there, the better to utilise when he was inevitably promoted. All in all, Edward was happy with his lot. And there were cures for seasickness.

He took a cab to Euston, and checked in to the accommodation provided to him by the firm, a modest room at Mrs Seacombe's lodging house, near the station. He had looked with envy at the new Great Northern when the cab passed it by, and rather wished he could stay there. But frugality was a byword in the House of Feebes. And Mrs Seacombe's rooms were clean and comfortable; he could not complain.

Having deposited his travelling bag, and taken a wash to the best of his abilities, Edward was eager to reacquaint himself with London. Mrs Seacombe's, like most houses, sat atop a cesspool into which the bodily discharge of guests and hostess both went daily (to say nothing of the servants). Consequently, the fumes of that combined output did rise, and were so pungent that it was clear no night soil men had come to clear the cesspit in quite a while. When Edward stepped out into the street the air was hardly fresher. It was darker now, with only gas lamps lit, and his feet sank into

the layer of fresh manure drizzled with urine. There was nothing to it, though. He had soaked a fresh handkerchief with laudanum, and breathed through it as he took his stroll. He had messengered to Samuel Mardon and George Sieveking, with whom he had often dined at Newman's Chophouse on Coleman Street. They had clerked together for the firm in former days. Lively lads, he thought. The streets seemed merry at this hour, gentlemen about their business and the fancy carriages carrying the well-to-do to social engagements, the theatre and the opera. London's dirt was less visible in gaslight. Though he was not a native of the city, he had had the measure of it by this time, having shared accommodation with the lads in Blackfriars. He knew which shadows to avoid and which to embrace as he walked. Laughter, curses, smoke and the smell of beer spilled out of pub doors. He passed a man passed out in the awning of a bookshop. A painted Jezebel leered from a first-floor window. A boy sold fried eels from a cart. Edward's stomach rumbled. He wended his way through narrow alleys, avoiding excrement, horses and cut-purses as well as he could. Nearer the market the traffic of carts and horses increased, as did the cursing of the drivers and the noise of the crowds. Edward was accosted by two flower girls, one pretty in the dim light, the other less so. 'Sweet violets, penny a bunch!' the first one said. The second leered at him in invitation that had nothing to do with flowers.

He ducked into the Saracen's Head, under the grisly sign of the bloodied, hacked-off head and its dark visage, and found a place of shelter and warmth in which convivial voices were raised and glasses clinked.

'Edward!'

He found Samuel and George in the back, holding beers. He shook hands with them, smiling.

'Why, you're as dark as a Spaniard!' Samuel said. 'Is it true you are going again so soon, Edward? Your note was unexpected!'

'It is true, Sam,' Edward said. 'I was not expecting it myself. But we do have tonight.'

'And tonight we shall have!' George said, grinning. He had somehow gone and fetched a fresh round of drinks from the bar. These he put none too steadily on the table.

'To your health, Edward!' he said.

They raised their glasses, laughing. Edward let the cool beer wash away the rancid taste that the city coated his tongue with. He did not usually partake of much drink, but this one went down easy.

'How go things with you both?' he said.

'I work for Sadler, Guest & Co.,' Samuel said. 'On the German commission side. It is but a small business, yet the hours are good and the pay agreeable.'

'And I a stockbroker for the Smith Brothers,' George said, 'with a speciality in railway shares. You should come and work with us, Edward. You always had a good head for numbers, and my masters are constantly in the market for top men.'

'I cannot abandon the family business,' Edward said, smiling. 'And besides, I am not yet ready to settle down!'

'Who talks of settling down?' George said, mock-affronted. 'Just because we do not go willy-nilly on leaky boats to foreign climes? We do not need to go to the world, for this is London, Edward. Here the world comes to *us*.'

'That I cannot argue with,' Edward said. Somehow the

drinks were finished. Sam fetched another round. 'I would have liked to remain longer,' Edward admitted. 'I do not like ships, as you both well know.'

'Seasickness still?' Sam said.

Edward shrugged. 'It passes after a while,' he said. 'The laudanum helps.'

Sam's eyes shone greedily, and he took a bottle of Godfrey's Cordial from the pocket of his jacket.

'I don't mind if I do,' George said, reaching for it. They all extracted their handkerchiefs and soaked the cloth with the cordial, then breathed it in deeply. Edward's head swam pleasantly. Somehow it was his round then. The conversation grew louder, the smoke heavier, the air warmer. Then they were outside, swaying pleasantly, the night beckoning. Down to the Albion they went, where a waiter recognised these were men about town, and seated them right away, and brought over acceptable wine. They ordered beef tongue, and fried eels, and turtle soup. Sam sipped the broth and George scoured the underside of the shell – he had always been good at digging out the morsels. Edward partook more leisurely, enjoying the company, and thinking of his voyage yet to come. For this while, though, it was good to simply be amongst friends.

The Albion was a lively establishment. Tobacco smoke filled the air and flower girls moved between groups of drunken patrons, an offer unspoken but proffered. A singer with her petticoats showing broke into a lewd rendition of 'Ta-ra-ra boom-de-ay' as a group of men in the corner, of a low class, sailors or porters, cheered her on, their glasses raised.

'A smart and stylish girl you see!' the singer cried. She

had more verve than aptitude. 'A belle of good society! Not too strict, but rather free, yet as right as right can be!'

'Hoorah!' the men shouted. Edward saw the two flower girls he had met earlier enter the Albion. They cast about them, and the plain one's eyes met his.

She winked.

'Never forward, never bold,' the singer cried, 'not too hot and not too cold, but the very thing, I'm told, that in your arms you'd like to hold!'

Everyone cheered and joined in the refrain, 'Ta-ra-ra boom-de-ay! Ta-ra-ra boom-de-ay!'

'Excuse me,' Edward said. He rose and went to the latrines, and when he had finished his business and was adjusting his garments saw that the flower girl had followed him and stood watching him with a calculating expression.

'You seem lonely,' she said.

'I…'

She shook her head.

'I get lonely too,' she said.

She had a rather lovely Irish accent, he thought.

She took his hand. He didn't struggle. She led him out the back, to a small walled garden. It was dark. They were not alone there, but no one paid them mind. Edward felt her closeness, her heat. She pressed against him, her hands reaching below, and he felt his face grow warm and his thoughts flow sluggishly. He thought of those long days to come at sea.

He reached for her. She was right, he thought. He was lonely. It had been a while. She pulled down his trousers. He fumbled under her garments. Her breasts were full. She took him by hand and eased him inside her. He gasped,

and his breathing came hard. He held her against him as he thrust, her back to the wall, his hands on her buttocks. It was over quickly.

He stood there feeling a little deflated. She eased him out and rearranged her clothes.

'What's your name?' he said.

'Mary.'

She looked at him curiously. Why did he ask? He reached in his pocket. He pulled out a gold pocket watch. It had been a Christmas gift from the firm one year to all employees. The name Feebes was etched on the underside of the casing. 'Would this do?' he said. The girl, this Mary, looked at him.

'Money,' she said.

'Look,' Edward said, scratching at the thin layer of paint. 'It's gold. Take it.'

'Five shillings,' the girl said.

'It's worth more than five shillings,' Edward said. 'Take it.'

The girl took it reluctantly. She put the watch to her ear.

'It works,' Edward said.

The girl nodded, touched Edward's cheek briefly with the back of her hand, and was gone.

Edward adjusted himself and re-entered the Albion. He couldn't see the flower girl. Sam and George watched his return with knowing grins.

'Where to, then?' George said.

'I know just the place,' Sam said. 'Shall we?'

'If Edward's business is concluded…' George said, and he and Sam both burst out laughing.

Edward shrugged, discomfited.

'We can go,' he said.

They settled their bill. It had been a simple transaction, Edward thought. That was all that life was, when it came down to it. A column of emoluments and a column of expenditures, running side by side until the inevitable moment when they had to add up: a final sum only God Himself, in His infinite wisdom, could reckon. Hence a final reckoning. And a man had to keep clean accounts.

He followed his friends with no further thought. They swayed slightly now, and the night took on a sickly sheen, the faces in the crowds ghostly and the horses themselves, as they passed, seemed insubstantial.

Flames flickering, their feet sank in manure, and the soot from the endless, rising cloud of ash settled on their clothes and on their faces and in their hair. Edward loosened his coat. They hurried through, and were rewarded with the sights and smells of Leicester Square in moments, the jaunty hotels cheek by jowl with the newly built Alhambra music hall and Wyld's Great Globe. Edward had been inside it once before, shortly after it opened. They had climbed up the ramps on the inside of the giant Earth and looked upon its features in miniature, its rivers and mountains, volcanoes and jungles. It had been a great draw when it opened, but now it seemed all but empty, with no one queuing to go inside, and dirt collected at the toll door.

On they went, not stopping, on to Piccadilly, and there they halted before a grand Egyptian temple, where torches burned upfront, illuminated the rising columns that supported the great entrance into shadow, over which stood two pharaonic figures carved in stone, gazing down upon the entrants, filling the air with a sense of theatre and mystery.

See The Two-Headed Nightingale! said the sign. *The African twins, Milly and Christina, born into slavery, only five years old, whom nature has linked by an indissoluble band, yet have a most pleasing and attractive appearance, and sing in two voices under the direction of one mind!*

'The freak show?' Edward said.

'They have elephants, too!' George said.

The barker, who had been crying for attention, came to regard them, his moustache waxed and his gloves yet white.

'The poor children's parents remain slaves on a North American plantation,' he told them with an air of great sorrow, 'and so their benefactor, Mr Thompson, has taken to exhibiting the conjoined twins solely for the purpose of raising the funds to enable the emancipation of their parents.' He was clearly following a script. 'The better feelings of humanity, as well as the natural impulse of curiosity, are therefore to be jointly gratified by their inspection! For you, only two shillings, gentlemen, but you must hurry, for the performance is about to start.'

He extended a gloved hand hopefully, and the three of them pooled their coins and deposited them into his waiting palm. He ushered them inside.

The Egyptian Hall, though well known to Edward, seldom held the same show twice. In its cavernous depths the visitors milled, fascinated by anything and everything that was on offer. In the middle of the great hall, the animal enclosure drew the largest crowds, to admire a skeletal giraffe, two elderly elephants and a similar pair of zebras, while nearby the snake charmer stood engulfed in a sleepy, recently fed python, and let people pet it for a penny a pop.

All about them men sold candied nuts and brandy-balls,

spice cakes and crumpets, coffee, hot wine and sherbet. Some of the acts stood alone, others had a barker to draw them a crowd. Edward passed a skeletal man and a bearded woman and a dwarf smoking a pipe. At the end of the hall, on a raised stage, stood the little girl twins, singing sweetly. George, in particular, was taken with the sight, and gazed on them in wonder, his mouth hanging open; while Samuel helped himself to a packet of nuts and stood munching on them contentedly.

Edward felt a headache coming on. He had drunk more than he should have. He was a man seldom given to drink. He had acted rashly with the Irish girl. He had not even used a skin, nor had she asked, so quickly was the transaction concluded. Eels, tongue and turtle meat sloshed unpleasantly in his stomach, which rumbled in dissent. The noise grew too noisome. The air was fetid. He bade a hasty farewell to his friends and staggered outside.

'Not here, man!' the barker said, and pushed him roughly. Edward fell into the muck, rose to his knees, and on his knees he retched.

He felt better then. He wiped himself down as best he could. He hailed a cab and let it carry him to Mrs Seacombe's, where he fell on his bed and was asleep in moments.