Mr Jamrach led me through the lobby and into the menagerie. The first room was a parrot room, a fearsome screaming place of mad round eyes, crimson breasts that beat against bars, wings that flapped against their neighbours, blood red, royal blue, gypsy yellow, grass green. The birds were crammed along perches. Macaws hung upside down here and there, batting their white eyes, and small green parrots flittered about our heads in drifts. A host of cockatoos looked down from on high over the shrill madness, high crested, creamy breasted. The screeching was like laughter in hell.

My eyes watered. My ears hurt.

‘This is how they like it!’ Jamrach said, laughing. ‘They flock.’

‘They’re crying out for parrots,’ Tim Linver said sagely, bobbing alongside with a loose and cocky gait.

‘Who is?’ I replied.

‘Customers is.’

I turned my head. Small ones, pretty things, blue, red, green, yellow, in rows behind the wire, good as gold and quiet.

‘My parakeets,’ said Jamrach. ‘Lovely birds.’

‘In and out in no time, this lot.’ Tim rocked back on his heels, speaking like an expert, as if the entire sales operation belonged to him.

The second room was quieter. Hundreds of birds, like sparrows but done out in all the colours of the rainbow, in long boxes. A wall of bluebirds, breasts the colour of rose sherbet. The air, fluty with song, like early morning.

‘Six shillings a pair,’ Tim said.

The third and last bird room was completely silent. All the way up to the ceiling, tiny wooden cages piled on top of one another, in each one a bird just the right size to fill the space, all of them mute and still. More than anything I’d seen, this room bothered me. I wondered if Mr Jamrach would let me have one. I could tame it and it would fly free in our room and sing. Out into the dazzling yard. A camel chewed behind the bars. A camel has to chew like it has to breathe. The animals were the stuff of fairy tales, the black bear with the white bib, the sideways-looking eye of the baby elephant, the head of the giraffe, immense, coming down at me from the sky to wet me with the heat of its flexing nostrils. I grew light of mind from the gorgeous stench. A wilderness steamed in the air all about me. And then I saw the tiger in his cage, with a lion on one side and some dog things on the other. The lion was a majestic and dreadful cat with the stern, sad face of a professor and wild billowing hair. He looked me in the eye for a whole moment before turning away in total indifference. A thick, pink
tongue licked out, caressing his nostrils. The hair stood up on the backs of
the dog things. The tiger paced, rippling, thick tail striking the air. Patterns
like little black fish swam on his back. Scimitars, blades, dashes, black
on gold, black on white. Heavy-headed, lower jaw hanging slack, backwards
and forwards, steady:

three paces and a half – turn —
three paces and a half – turn —
three paces and a half —

‘See!’ said Jamrach. ‘This is the bad boy. He knows he’s been a bad
boy, he is shamed, see.’

‘Has he got a name?’
‘Not yet. He hasn’t found his buyer yet.’
‘Who buys a tiger?’ I asked.
‘Zoos,’ Tim said.

‘Not just zoos,’ Jamrach said, ‘people who collect.’

We went up a ladder to a place where there was a beast like a pie, a
great lizard mad and grinning, and monkeys, many monkeys, a stew of
nature, a bone pile of it, a wall, a dream of small faces. Baby things. No,
ancient, impossibly old things.

‘And here...’ Jamrach, with some showmanship, whipped the lid off
a low round basket. Snakes, thick, green and brown, muscled, lay faintly
flexing upon one another like ropes coiled high on the quay. ‘Snappy
things, these,’ Jamrach said, putting back the lid and tying a rope round it.

That was all I ever wanted. To stay among the animals for ever and
ever and look into their eyes whenever I felt like it. So when, back in the
smoky office, Mr Jamrach offered me a job, I could only cry, ‘Oh yes!’