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Opening extract from

The Doomsday Machine: Another Outstanding Adventure of Horatio Lyle

Written by

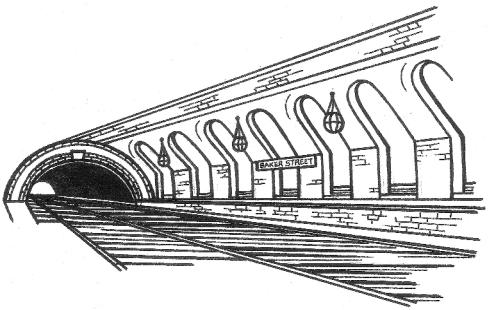
Catherine Webb

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Atom

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INTRODUCTION

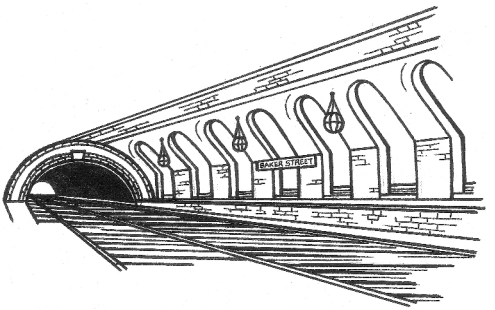
Expense

To build the Machine, it took seven years, fifty-two scientists, nine eccentric inventors, three idiot geniuses let out of the asylum, two hundred and twenty-three labourers, forty-nine railwaymen with a grasp of steam technology, three barges of coal a day, ninety colliers to shovel it into the furnaces, several hundred thousand pounds levied from that year's import of opium into China, one man with a will sliced from silvery steel, and a gentleman with a thing for lightning storms. And the London sewers – that part came last, five years into the project, the final breakthrough that they hadn't even realized they needed, the moment when everyone at once sat up and thought, *yes*.

Even then, they said, it still couldn't be made to work – the scale was too big, the idea too grand, the enemy too clever, the expense too high, the forces at work too immense. Maybe in a hundred years, they said, maybe, there would be the understanding necessary or the tools available, able to chisel the two-mile construction site down to something smaller. Maybe, in a hundred years, men would understand the energy necessary to complete it. It took a risk, on the part of the man who had conceived the device, to make it come off, to find what was needed to turn the Machine into the monster it was meant to be.

But most of all, when the expense and the smoke and the heat and the metal, so much metal, was ignored, it took an *enemy*. In every glistening part of the Machine, in every cog and piston and giant arm fatter than an elephant's waist, in every bolt and screw, thousands of them gleaming in the firelight, was written the determination to win the war. Without an enemy, there was no need for the Machine. With so much feeling and anger built into its very rivets, even the coldest of observers watching its burning sides as it belched orange flame, began to speak of it as something alive. When it was only a few days from completion, work if anything seemed to sag – completed, it had only one purpose, and when that purpose was done, there would be no enemy, and therefore there would be no need for the Machine. It could rust with the rest of the weapons of this very special war. And also in those final few days, as the last coil was spun, one man, who had poured already a large part of his soul into the device, sat up and thought the forbidden thought – *Which* enemy?

This is the story of what happened next.



CHAPTER 1

Eyes

London, 1865

Somewhere in the eastern edges of Clerkenwell, a man is running. His feet splash in still, turgid puddles of oddly coloured liquid dripped from poorly dyed shirts hung out across the way, sending up droplets of thick water as he races down the street. He slips in the mud that has been loosened by the early spring showers, grabs hold of an old cart made entirely of splinters and mould left to rot in the middle of the road, swings himself round a corner and squints through the gloom for a light more than the sick orange glow from smelly tallow candles, seen under the doors of the houses. He hears footsteps behind, squelching on

the mud, and above, the rattle of something fast and light on the roof, glances up and for a moment sees a shape dance across the plank between two rooftops and down through a broken ceiling into a house ahead. He spots a doorway to his right, open, dropping down and smelling of rotting straw and sewage, and turns, and runs into it.

The running man flees down the stairwell, under a black iron lamp that hasn't burnt for years, into a tight street whose old cobbles are faintly visible underneath a thin coating of slime. He accelerates as his shoes slap loudly on the stones, as he hears ahead the sound of voices, sees a flash of light and prays this is it, escape, not believing he was so foolish as to get into this situation in the first place. He turns a corner and almost immediately runs into a shoulder that is pressed up against another and another and another and smells roasting nuts and lamp oil and sees cheap lace and neckties and hears, 'Hey-o, Billy, Billy get the doxy missus!' and, 'Two'penny, yours for two'penny, if you just got the glint . . .' and 'Haybag, haybag, I ain't never done nothing . . .'

He pushes his way into the crowd, turning sideways into it and ramming his shoulder through, stepping on shoes and moving even as voices shout, 'I was here first!' and one or two, more sympathetic, cry, 'Make way for the toff,' and are answered by hoots of laughter, and one or two more knowing say, 'It's a bobby!' and immediately open up space to let him through. The man is an odd sight in this crowd, and not just because of the way he moves, constantly turning his shoulder and feet to find the fastest way into the depth of the crowd, eyes forward and down. His coat is long and black, well cut but obviously neglected, with

patches sewn on using the wrong colour thread; his pockets bulge; his shoes are practical but battered, turned pale brown from the mud spattered halfway up to his knees; his sandy-ginger hair is half-hidden by an old-fashioned broad-brimmed hat pulled low over his eyes; he wears no waistcoat but looks as if he should; nor does he have any gloves. He has long fingers stained with odd, faded colours, though not from tobacco. As he moves, he starts pulling off his coat, not diverting his eyes from where he steps, but working steadily towards the object of the crowd's attention: a set of double doors pulled wide open to let them into the heart of the nearby buzz. He elbows his way forward, slips a penny into the hand of the waiting doorman, a boy of no more than seven years of age with his cap out and an expression suggesting that if you didn't pay *this* doorman, your kneecaps would never see another day, and enters the heat of the hall.

He can hear distantly the sound of two voices straining above the babble of slang within the theatre's thin walls, muddling their way through a sketch that will soon lead to a rousing chorus of 'The Nutting Girl' – a tribute to London's best-loved ladies of repute – and other light classics. The heat is worse than the noise; it hits him full in the face and makes every capillary dilate in distress; it falls on him like a wave, making each moment more intensely hot than the last. Everywhere there are people, elbow to elbow: girls draped on the arm of their chosen lad, boys in groups shouting random abuse at another group across the hall, old men dragging their daughter off a rival's son while glowering within the fringe of their overgrown whiskers. Few actually pay attention to the man and woman on stage, in huge ginger wigs and quantities of cheap lace, who are desperately trying to

muddle their way through a chorus of, 'Ah-hey-ho the haybale!' Those who are listening join in, each in their own key and with their own special version of the tune, determined to drown out any rivals who might believe *they* know better.

The fleeing man glances over his shoulder, and for a second thinks he sees a flash of green, and a black silk top hat horribly out of place, that even as he looks is knocked off by someone in the crowd with a cry of 'Toff, toff!' He ducks down into the crowd, bending forward so that his head is lower than the average shoulder and the world smells of armpit, and starts butting his way further into the mêlée, following the nearest flow of people past the downward staircase that leads into the pit in front of the stage, and on to the upper balcony, which creaks and heaves under the weight of bodies who have piled in there for the evening. Something white and sticky falls on his shoulder: hot wax dripping from the foul-smelling, smoky candles intermixed with the battered lamps hung round the edge of the hall.

As he moves forward, he methodically turns his coat, pulling the sleeves back in on themselves and out the other side, revealing underneath a pale grey fabric, sewn just like the black, and looking just as much like the outside of a coat as its lining, complete with bulging pockets. He starts pushing his arms back into the sleeves, almost kneeling down among the crowd to hide his actions, then straightens up, scrunching his hat down to a handful and ramming it inside his coat pocket in a further effort at disguise. He peers over the heads of the crowd, then looks down the short distance to the pit, where a fight, over what he couldn't guess, has broken out in one corner near the old man with his three-stringed fiddle. A hint of black coat somewhere on the

edge of the crowd, really too finely cut to be in this hall? Perhaps – it is hard to tell in the dim light.

He edges to the far corner of the hall, where the shadows are deepest, and muscles his way into a patch of wall between an old soldier missing an ear, and his drinking companion, who is clinging on to the wall to stop it swaying around him. He shuffles down to keep his head low, folds his arms across his chest, tucks in his chin and prepares to wait out the evening amid the sweat of the hall. He claps when the audience claps, boos when they boo, swears fluently when they swear, roars with laughter when they laugh and somehow, by a strange twisting of his face and lilt of his voice, isn't the same toff who walked in a few minutes ago, but shrinks down into himself while throwing his voice out across the hall with every cry of 'Get off!' or lets a tear well in his eye with the sadness of a true war veteran when the man in the big waistcoat and huge moustache raises his hand and calls for a moment to remember the lost of the Crimea and Britain's noble undertaking. Only when he thinks no one is watching does the openness of his face cloud for a moment, as he scans the crowd in search of something out of place, and shrinks further into the darkness at some half-imagined shimmer of movement by the doors.

And while the man hides in the music hall, and watches, without any connection or awareness of circumstance, the thoughts of another are about to turn in his direction, and they go something like this . . .

'*Xiansheng*?'

'Berwick has gone. Run. They found his bed empty in the night.'

'I find it hard to see how.'

'Nevertheless. *They* helped him.'

'How could they know?'

'They have friends in high places; you know this. They were watching him for some months before the calamity at St Paul's.'

'Where has he gone?'

'I don't yet know.' A sigh, a letting out of long breath, that just happens to have casual words tangled up in it. 'He took the regulator.'

A moment's silence, while the full implication settles in. Then an overly contained, 'I will send my men.'

'They won't find him.'

'You underestimate our will, *xiansheng*. What are you thinking?'

'If Berwick felt himself to be in danger, where would he run?'

'The city is a good place to hide.'

'Who would he run to?'

A silence while the speakers in the room contemplate this question. Then, very quietly, one man says, 'Oh. I see what you might be thinking. Is it going to be a problem?'

'Maybe. Not yet. We'll see what he does first, we'll see if Berwick contacts him. There's still time.'

'I hope you're right, *xiansheng*.'

Some miles away from both the hiding man and those who contemplate him, a hand stained black with coal dust reaches out for a lever the height of a ten-year-old child and the thickness of a woman's wrist, and presses the brake off. Its owner looks up, awaiting a command.

'Well?' says a voice like the snap of a silk flag in a strong breeze.

'Without the regulator . . .' stumbles the owner of the blackened hand.

'The regulator is only needed for discharge, and by his own mathematics that is three days of pumping away! Do not concern yourself with the regulator.'

The man with the black-dusted hand, who is smarter than the owner of the commanding voice gives him credit for, thinks about this, then shrugs to himself and pushes all his weight against the lever, rocking it heavily forward. Somewhere a long way below the gantry on which he stands, something goes *thunk*. Something else gives off a long, painful hiss, something tall and metal screeches inside stiff gears, a furnace door slams, a shovel digs into coal, a fat coil of tightly wrapped cables, each one thicker than an arm, turns on an axis and locks into place between two metal points that gleam in dull orange light from the banks of burning coal a long way below, and, as slow and irresistible as an iceberg, the Machine starts to move.

It is bigger than the deck of the largest man o'war; it fills the space of an average cathedral; it burns more coal than twenty trains rushing from London to Edinburgh; it contains more metal than Brunel's greatest construction; it is hotter than the hottest music hall on a summer's night; it needs a hundred men to throw coal into its furnaces just to keep it powered up. Even to the man who created it, whose monster it is, it can have no other name than the Machine.

Although he didn't know it at the time, to the man hiding in the music hall, all these things were, in fact, related. If he had known

that then, he might have been tempted to argue that by the same reasoning, everything in the universe was related, an endless pattern of inter-connectedness and general shared being, and so on and so forth, but frankly his attention was occupied with more practical matters. The fight in the corner of the pit was resolved by the fiddler smashing a small sandbag over the head of the nearest combatant. This in turn led to a general acceptance that nothing more in the show would be as impressive, and so the two singers, looking relieved, started winding it down. This was followed by a huge burst of rousing applause and a spontaneous chorus of five different versions of 'God Save the Queen', three of which weren't even that profane, and which led the hiding man to think that maybe this was a comparatively civilized hall after all and that perhaps when circumstances were different, he might come back again for a nice night out, maybe bring the children as an educational experience or nostalgia trip, depending on which child was watching.

As the crowd started to move, he took hold of an arm belonging to the drunk old soldier, who seemed too far gone even to notice the stepping of his own feet, and with a muttered, 'Evenin', pops,' started walking him towards the door, keeping his chin tucked down towards the old man's face as if at any moment the man might speak words of wisdom that he had to hear. 'Come on, grandpa, ain't your night, where's the patch, huh?'

With the old man supported firmly under the arm, he made it out into the night air on a tidal wave of heat, the darkness shockingly cold after the hall, and followed the main flow of the crowd along the street. The walk took him west, towards

Smithfield, and he was almost on the edge of the market there before the crowd started to thin out to just a few stragglers. He found an inn, the door half-open and the shutters drawn, and led the old man in, depositing him by the scarcely burning fire. The drunken man, oblivious, let his head loll and, within an instant of being settled, gave out a sound that was half a belch and half a snore.

Satisfied with his night's work so far, the man in the grey coat slipped to the door and peered outside. A single lamp hung down from a house bridging the end of the narrow street; at the other end, another faint light burnt by the doorway of a small church, its stones stained black with soot. Across the way was the high wall of a workhouse, all the lights long since out, and the gate chained shut for the evening. He listened for the sound of movement, and heard nothing more than the scuttle of a rat somewhere in the churchyard, the hiss of a cat that has seen its prey, and, in the distance, the shout of the butchers as they started to prepare their meat for the morning's market, and the bleating of a flock of sheep being herded through the arches of Smithfield for slaughter.

There was no sign of another person on the street.

The man let out a sigh, closed the inn door quietly behind him, and started walking, his feet barely making a sound now as he moved up the side of the road, hands in his pockets. He passed under the light and glanced round the corner, into more quiet streets, all darkened now. He took a moment to recover his bearings, glanced up out of habit to see if there were any stars – the clouds were too thick that night to tell – and looked down again, into a pair of bright green eyes, so bright he could see

their emerald colour even though the owner stood just outside the light.

He didn't speak, didn't even have time for the surprise to show on his face, but dragged one hand out of his pocket and opened his fingers, hurling something small and silverish on to the floor. It shattered, the fragments of glass lost behind a sudden explosion of smoke and sparks that hissed and spat around his feet, obscuring him in a second. He turned and ran. Down the street, past the door of the inn, over the old rusted fence of the church, into the churchyard, bounding over graves and past ancient memorial slabs, over the fence on the other side – a longer drop than he expected; his feet almost went out from under him on the street as he landed – crouching low beneath the raised bank of the churchyard wall, turning and running again, down an alley that smelt of the sewers and old refuse, into a courtyard criss-crossed with empty washing lines, round the side of an old trough converted into a washer-woman's basin, searching for an alley at the other end, a flicker of light ahead, the sound of a voice calling, 'Two of the clock, two of the clock!' somewhere in the distance, and a policeman's whirling rattle. He chose a direction based on the sound and ran blindly into the darkness, feeling his way along a wall, across shut doors spiky with splinters, until the wall stopped and turned into an alley so tight he had to swivel sideways to edge through it, pressing his back against one wall and shuffling his way along it towards the darker patch of darkness at the end that suggested, dear God, perhaps another street.

He stepped out into it, looked left and right, and saw just a second too late a white-gloved fist swinging towards him. He

turned his face in time for it to hit his shoulder, knocking him back; heard steps, and felt another hand grab his other arm, dragging it back, another hand somewhere across his face, leather-covered fingers scraping over his teeth and nose, pulling his head to one side. And there it was again, the flash of green eyes that he shouldn't be able to see were green, like the gleam of a cat's gaze in the night, before it darts away. Knowing too well what he might see, he closed his eyes as tight as he could even as he gave up fighting, feet scrabbling in vain for a foothold, slipping half to his knees, held up only by the hands that restrained him.

Silence settled. The only breathing he could hear was his own, fast and heavy. He took a deeper breath and held it, letting his ears adjust to the quiet in those few seconds, and heard other, softer breaths near by, from at least three or four people, and the sound of shoes on the cobbles. He let out his breath in a rush as fear and adrenaline took control of his heart again and made it hammer.

Gently, a voice said, a woman's voice like the sound of wind chimes, 'Open your eyes.' He squeezed his eyes shut even tighter and rammed his chin into his chest, bending his head down towards the ground. 'Please open your eyes,' said the voice. He didn't respond. 'You know, I could try my subtle womanly graces on you,' continued the voice easily, 'or I could cut off your little finger. Which would you rather?'

When he didn't answer, someone took his left hand, which was duly raised, turning his palm skywards. He blurted, still not opening his eyes, 'Subtle womanly graces, please! Any day!'

The fingers across his hand stopped moving, although the grip on his arm wasn't relaxed.

'Where is Berwick?' He could feel the warmth of the woman's breath in his ear as she whispered the question.

'Who what?'

'Little fingers are surprisingly useful; it's difficult to play an octave on the piano without your little finger. Where is Berwick?'

'Uh . . . south of Wensleydale?'

'Mr Berwick, Mr Andrew Berwick Esquire.'

'I think you've got the wrong man, ma'am.'

The fingers that had seized his hand let it go, then brushed his chin and gently pulled it up. 'Why do you close your eyes?' breathed the voice.

'Nervous reaction?' hazarded the man.

'Don't you want to see who I am?'

'No, not at all!'

'Why not?'

'You might . . . not want a living witness?' he suggested.

'To what crime? Here we are, pleasantly discussing an acquaintance of yours. Where is Berwick?'

'Never met the man.'

'He was your father's closest friend.'

'Children never pay attention to their parents; it's all part of learning about life!'

'Are you scared of being bewitched?'

'I'm superstitious, me, never open my eyes anytime I get mugged in case of the evil eye and the pox and . . . and . . . other bewitching things.'

'I thought you were a scientist.'

'Why'd you think that, miss?'

'The contents of your pockets are unusual for an ordinary working man.'

'I'm a physician's apprentice.'

'You're too old to be an apprentice.'

'A physician's life is one of constant learning, miss!'

'You're certainly a poor liar, whatever else you may be.'

'You catch me at a bad time.'

A foot hit somewhere behind his kneecap, not particularly hard, but enough to send him staggering, sliding awkwardly down on to one knee, head immediately pulled up from behind to look at what he guessed must be the darkness in which stood the woman with the wind-chime voice. She said, 'You are carrying a magnet inside your coat pocket, sir. And you're still afraid of us? Does it not make you wonder why, after all that you have done and all you have seen, we do not just kill you now? Don't you desire to know answers? Don't you want to know where Berwick is?'

The man hesitated. Slowly, he said, 'Why do you want Berwick?'

'He is building something; a machine. It is a terrible thing, this creation; he should not have started it, and he now realizes this. Others are looking for it, others will know that you know him, others will ask you these same questions that we ask, but they may not be so sparing of your little finger. So, I ask you again: where is he?'

'I don't know!'

'With your eyes shut, your imagination must run wild. You must be thinking, "What are these people going to do? What next?" It is a strange security and a strange danger, not being

able to see – security in that the pain may be less without seeing what is done to you, like an amputee who didn't see the leg being removed and can't quite believe it's gone, who still thinks he can twiddle his toes. Or like the blind prisoner who knows that pain must come but doesn't know where from, and so imagines a thousand different ways of dying, a thousand different kinds of torment, until his mind is so wild with terror that the pain he merely thinks of becomes real, more real than anything that could be inflicted on him.

'Which are you, sir? Do you imagine a thousand horrors worse than anything you could survive? Or do you cherish the comfort of not needing to know; do you need to see to believe that you really are dead, that you really are dying, that you really have been hurt? Have you ever had occasion to find out?'

'I don't know where he is! I swear, I haven't seen him for years, I don't know what you want! *I don't know where Berwick is!*'

Silence. Then a sound of movement in the air, and the grip on his arms was relaxed. He flopped forward on to his hands and knees, still keeping his eyes tightly shut. There were footsteps moving quickly away.

Her voice overhead said, 'I believe you.' He heard an intake of breath, a hesitation; then, in a rush, almost an apology. 'You have to understand; the thing he is building will kill my people, without discrimination. They will set it off and never even know those who die, but they will rejoice in their deaths. It is blind, cold, effortless murder. Do you know all your enemies well enough to say that every one of them is evil, that every one of them must die? I choose to let you live, Horatio Lyle.'

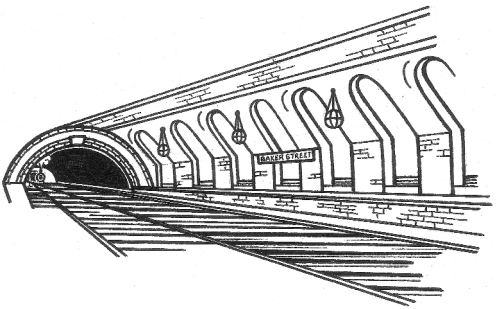
Eyes

He opened his eyes, saw black leather shoes capped with shiny silver buckles, looked up at a huge black cloak and half-concealed white-gloved hands, thence to a fur-lined collar, to a chin the colour of almond, past a warm, lightly amused smile, to a pair of emerald green eyes, crinkled at the edges, and a face framed by tightly tied and plaited long black hair.

'Mister Lyle,' said the woman politely.

'Miss,' he mumbled.

'You have lovely eyes,' she said. Turning smartly, she marched off down the street, leaving Horatio Lyle alone in the night.



CHAPTER 2

Curiosity

A brief history of Teresa Hatch. It is brief of necessity, since at the time of her coming down to breakfast the morning after a man ran through the streets of Clerkenwell and a Machine began to move, Teresa Hatch was, in her own words, 'not so old and proper as how you shouldn't go and pay for all my things an' cook for me an' all'.

She was born, so she'd been told, in a workhouse in the Aldgate area, and raised to be respectful, God-fearing, dutiful and hard-working, until about the age of five, when she discovered that all of those characteristics put together didn't put bread on the table half so well as the ability to do a four-hundred-yard sprint with someone else's bread stuck under one arm. Upon

which discovery she promptly departed by the nearest window from the orphanage where she'd been placed, wandered the streets for a while, fell in with a small but companionable group of snipes whose prime trick was distraction (she would fall down at the feet of a passing stranger and mumble incoherently while someone else did his pockets) and gradually worked her way up through the ranks so that by ten years of age she was widely respected as one of the most adept pickpockets and cat burglars in the East End, capable of crawling down the smallest chimney to grab the largest prize, always sought by the police, and never ever caught.

Except once; and indeed the one time she'd been caught, it hadn't been so much by the police, as by a special constable who always adopted a baffled expression when presented with a truncheon, and held it between the tips of his fingers as if it might explode. Considering his attachment to the use of chemicals that often did exactly that if you gave them so much as a dirty look, let alone picked them up, this was a character trait Tess always found odd. The gentleman's name was Horatio Lyle, and Tess had quickly struck up a mutually beneficial deal with him. He provided breakfast, a roof over her head, money, relative liberty and the occasional brush with death in unusual circumstances, and she picked any lock he wanted her to, held test tubes with pliers and a frightened expression, learnt the English alphabet and even, under the greatest of pressures, took baths.

Admittedly, on occasion in Lyle's company the brushes with death and adventure were a bit too real: in the few months she'd known him she had seen more things explode, and wielded more nitroglycerin than the average artillery officer, at a wide variety

of monsters, demons, battling hordes and insane, occasionally indestructible psychopaths. But overall, the deal between Teresa Hatch and Horatio Lyle was a good one.

Except for this morning.

Tess had come downstairs, ready to be fed, at exactly that hour when it's too late for breakfast and too early for lunch, so that Mister Lyle would have to cook something huge and greasy just in between the two meals and comprising all Tess's favourite mid-morning foods, but Lyle wasn't cooking. He was not at the stove ready to fulfil his side of the bargain in bacon and eggs form. Instead he sat slumped in an old rocking chair, duly rocking, fingers steepled in front of his nose and heavy bags under his eyes. Under the chair was the fruit of their combined toil over the last couple of weeks – an object that Lyle called the 'High Velocity, Low Torsion Wind Bolt Delivery Device', Lyle having a somewhat exacting standard for the names of his inventions. Teresa, more accurately, described it as 'the big crossbow type thing what probably won't never be safe for no one to handle'. Scattered around the rest of the kitchen were bags of flour, sacks of sugar, preserved hams kept in the cool, bundles of herbs, stacks of cadmium and zinc blocks kept between clay sheets, pots of tubes and wire, ladles and saucepans and charcoal and bottles of silver nitrate, and all the other necessary paraphernalia of Lyle's profession, whatever it was Lyle's profession could be said to be.

Over the past few months Tess had found a role within Lyle's household as somewhere between lab assistant and self-appointed spiritual guide, at least in her own mind. This morning she squinted at him suspiciously, considered all the choices available and announced, 'You're smelly this morning, Mister Lyle.'

His eyes didn't glance up from the floor, where they had locked with a look of suspicion, as if surprised to find the tiles exactly where he'd left them the night before. His voice, however, was cordial enough. 'Good morning to you too, Teresa.'

'Ain't you slept none?'

'Not last night, no.'

'Ain't good for your health, Mister Lyle. You'll get all grey and old.'

'You show a touching care for my well-being.'

Tess hesitated, not sure what he meant but certain that it couldn't be good. Finally she said, 'Ain't we havin' breakfast this morning?'

'Breakfast?'

'The big – really big – meal what is vital for a healthy and happy day,' she added helpfully.

'Oh.' He looked distracted, worried. 'Haven't you had breakfast yet?'

Tess gave him the look that Popes down the ages must have given junior cardinals when asked if they'd found God already. He didn't seem to notice. Her confidence waned. 'Oi,' she said. 'Summat . . . bad happen?'

'Maybe.'

'Like . . . bathtub bad?'

'Perhaps.'

'Maybe we should have a holiday and see if it fixes itself!'

'Possibly.'

'You don't really mean that, do you, Mister Lyle? It's the way you ain't saying "yes" that gives me the clue. When you ain't saying "yes" what you really mean is "no".'

'Teresa, did I ever introduce you to Berwick?'

'Nope. Is he rich?'

The question seemed to take Lyle a little by surprise. 'Well, I suppose he's passably well-to-do.'

'Is he charitable with his money?' Tess's face was a picture of innocence.

'He's an old family friend, one of the first to really dabble in electricity and magnetism, an acquaintance of Faraday's, even. Unorthodox, but . . .'

'Not charitable?'

'I must admit the idea never crossed my mind.'

'But in askin' about Berwick you must have an ult . . . ulte . . . a nasty plan, right, 'cos there's got to be a *reason*. So I'm thinkin' as how all this you not sleeping and not cooking breakfast – not even for a poor hungry waif such as myself, for example – and how you're not cooking breakfast and this Berwick fella are all sorta tied up together, right?'

'Probab—' He saw her expression, and sighed. 'Yes.'

'I've been practising insight when no one's looking, Mister Lyle,' Tess confided smugly. 'Are you going to cook now?'

'Teresa,' said Lyle in a righteous voice, 'I find myself in a conundrum.'

'Oh dear. Is it itchy?'

He tried again. 'Perplexed. Bewildered. Bemused.' Tess's face remained optimistically empty. Lyle sighed and gave in. 'In a bit of a pickle.'

'Oh, right, yes, in a conunundrum! 'Course. Should've said.'

'I think I may be about to do something very, very stupid.'

'That ain't much like you, Mister Lyle.'

'Do you think you could say that without grinning, Teresa?'

'No.'

'Thank you for your devotion and respect. If I do this thing . . .'

'What thing?'

'Let me get to the end of a sentence and I'll tell you!'

'Oh. All right. You just keep goin' an' all. Don't let me put you off.'

'*If* I do this thing, it's quite possible that I'll be plunging myself, my friend and you into terrible and fraught danger, mystery and entrapment, daring-do and doubt, so on and so forth, you get the general idea – from which there may be no escape.'

'Uh-huh.'

'What do you mean, "uh-huh"?'

'Like how you does when you goes "perhaps". What thing?'

'But I mean really, where's the harm?'

'Hello, Mister Lyle? What thing?'

His gaze detached itself from the floor and met Teresa's. For a moment, she saw something unsettling within it. He said, 'I'm going to go and see Berwick.'

Elsewhere in the city, waiting in a hansom cab, a woman with white gloves is polishing a crossbow. There are a lot of things wrong with this picture. For a start, crossbows had gone out of fashion even in the most obscure of aristocratic sporting circles several decades ago. And any woman seen handling such an implement, at least if she was from a class that had enough money to care about such things, would be an automatic candidate for the asylum, with its black walls, ice baths, boiling

furnaces and faint aroma of opium. To make matters worse, the crossbow that was being polished was of an odd design, all strange bends and tiny spiralling cogs, as if its designer had secretly wanted to build clocks instead and given up at the third stroke. The bolt that was being slotted with surprising ease into the bow was made of brass that shone dully in the lamplight by which the woman worked.

As she worked, she sang under her breath, an odd tune, wordless, whose notes see-sawed up and down like a bow drawn across a mountain top, seeing what tune could be scratched from stone. That said, she sang with a strong voice, and well enough to anyone who knew what kind of music she enjoyed and could recognize skill at it. As she sang, she oiled the cogs of the crossbow, and now and then glanced through the open window of the cab, watching a door down at the bottom of the street, and waited.

She watched a bobby in a dark blue cape walk down the pavement. Fat ginger whiskers stuck out from under his helmet like spilt paint overflowing from a tin. A woman with a little parasol, a collection of street snipes trying to get it off her, a plump vicar on his way to morning tea, a chimneysweep and his boy, and the bobby again, on the other side of the road, going back the way he'd come. From the recesses of the cab the woman watched him pass, waited, and a few minutes later, saw him pass again. Letting out a patient sigh, she laid the little crossbow on the floor and climbed out of the cab. She walked up to the bobby, tapped him on the shoulder, and smiled.

He turned, and looked straight into a pair of bright green eyes.

'Good morning, sir,' she said. 'I think it's time for you to leave now.'

And he did. Of course, that still left the girl with the hoop and stick and the gentleman in the vegetable garden hiding out behind a particularly large marrow, but at least one of them was on her side anyway and as for the other . . . well, if the enemy really thought that Lyle would leave through the front door after his encounter last night, they were gravely mistaken.

She sat back, smiled, and settled down to wait.

Horatio Lyle was, Tess had to admit, very good at what he did. Recent activity at Lyle's house had involved large parts of it being destroyed by fire, rampaging mobs and what Lyle always tactfully described as 'excitable exothermic reaction' and Tess translated as 'a really big bang'. All this had led to extensive refurbishment, during which Tess managed to blag her way into an even bigger bedroom. It had also led to reconstruction both in Lyle's house and, to Tess's surprise and the amazement of Lyle's neighbours, throughout the entire area.

Horatio Lyle had established himself as something of a charitable figure in his neighbourhood, which was on that socially ambiguous boundary between the criminal slums of Blackfriars where only the most intrepid bobbies went, and the more genteel, old-fashioned houses of the Strand. With money gleaned from previous family adventures, wise investment and the selling of occasionally crackpot ideas to the interested, he'd met the cost of repairing several nearby buildings. A Methodist chapel found its roof mended, a pickle manufactory had new windows installed, and a small workhouse was graced, from the roof right

down to the ground, with an iron staircase which, though the owners weren't sure what purpose it served, did look immensely impressive. The Fountain pub, where rumour went that more politics were decided than in any palace in the country, was gifted with a new set of polished doors and a brass plate to put next to them. A group of ladies who walked every day up to the flower market next to the Royal Opera, to sell blooms mostly stolen from the graveyard behind the rectory, suddenly lived with solid roofs, and new washing lines to string end to end across the narrowing streets that bridged the recently covered ditches leading towards the river and Charing Cross.

There was a genuinely charitable streak in Lyle's nature. But it tended to be thwarted, as with most things, by how much time he had and who was trying to kill him at that particular instance. These left him little opportunity to find causes to defend other than his own skin, and very few people bothered appealing to him for cash, for fear that while they were in his presence something excitingly scientific might happen and they'd never get the chemical smell out of their clothes. That Lyle would go out of his way to act as a benefactor had therefore been a surprise to his neighbours. But only Tess, a few select workmen and some startled pigeons had the faintest idea of the world he had been creating above the streets, in which the repaired weathervane on a church could be a lighting conductor to a lab, the window in a workhouse could be opened at the twisting of a concealed handle, and the chimney so considerately swept and repaired could now fit not just the monkey-like apprentices to the chimneysweeps, but a fully grown man on his way to somewhere else.

On some nights, Tess had climbed up the ladder in Lyle's attic, on to his sloping, red-tiled roof. There she would sit, and listen to the city a long way below, and watch the lights on the river, and feel at home.

This morning, Lyle climbed the ladder on to his roof with Tess in tow and, cradled in his arms, a bundle consisting mostly of two huge drooping ears and a large nose. The bundle's name was Tate, and though scholars and zoologists could never quite believe it, he was Lyle's pet dog.

Lyle took a deep breath of smelly morning air and declared, 'Today, it will rain just after lunch.'

Tess looked up at a grey overcast sky, and shrugged.

Lyle looked annoyed. 'Do you want to know *why* it'll rain just after lunch?'

Tess considered her options. 'If I says . . . *no* . . . you'll be sulky all day, right?'

'On the contrary, I'll consider it merely sad that this is information you have chosen to neglect, a new insight into a world of . . .'

'All right then!' Tess bounded to the edge of the roof with reckless abandon, picking her way easily down the sloping tiles while Lyle turned green and even Tate's usually dour brown eyes widened at the sight of her. She peered into the street below and said, 'So why we going out this way?'

'I don't want to use the front door.'

'Why not?'

'It might be being watched.'

'Why? What you gone and done?'

'Nothing, nothing.'

'And you ain't gone and told me why you want to see this Berwick bloke so sudden!'

'I met some people last night who were . . . interested in his well-being. Their interest has piqued my interest. Or rather, I want to know why they're interested, and suspect that they are going to be interested in my interest and following it with as much interest as I follow theirs, while of course never forgetting our common . . . *interest*.'

'That were a very odd thing you just gone and said, Mister Lyle.'

'I trust it was sufficiently obscure for you to fail completely to comprehend it.'

'You're usin' big words to scare me, ain't you?'

'Absolutely. Come back from the edge.'

'I ain't going to fall.'

'Teresa,' declared Lyle firmly, 'a *Good* brush with death and adventure is a *Safe* brush with death and adventure, yes?'

'Yes, Mister Lyle.'

'A *Safe* brush with death and adventure involves being *Prepared*.'

'Yes, Mister Lyle.'

'It involves *Caution* and *Consideration*. It is, in short, all about steering clear of steep drops when you see any and never, ever pulling the big lever marked "Bang". I hope we understand each other.'

'So . . . we're goin' on an adventure?'

'Maybe.'

'Oh. All right.' She scampered up the roof again, balanced for a moment on the raised edge of the top, swung round to cling on

to a chimney, looked out across the city and beamed. 'If we're playin' at the how-we-mustn't-be-followed game again, can I choose the way we go?'

'Very well.'

The route chosen by Tess took them across the old tavern with its wharfside crane, admittedly now a good fifty yards from the nearest water, down a ladder into a vegetable garden, up over a wall into an alley running down to a watergate, and through the back door of the local bakery – which suddenly found itself short of three scones and a loaf – and out into the black, crammed and overshadowed streets that ducked and struggled under and past the railway lines of Charing Cross, where every other face was a grey shadow, blacked out under the stinking belches of smoke from the trains passing overhead and across the river. From there, a very out-of-breath Lyle hailed a hansom cab.

The residence of Mr Andrew Berwick Esquire, was in one of the wide, shiny streets north of Gray's Inn, defined by straight lines and relatively clean windows all the way up to that other patch of splotched off-green, Coram's Fields. The streets in most other directions around this enclosure of gentility largely consisted of tenements compressed together. This, and the fact that just a bit further up Gray's Inn Road the unwary traveller hit King's Cross, where the murders were almost as regular as the trains, was something the inhabitants tended to ignore.

Berwick was no exception. The maid who answered the door wore an immaculately white apron, and requested that Lyle and Tess use the iron scraper at the door to wipe their feet clean of

manure and mud from the streets. Valiantly she merely winced when Tate snuffled his way into the house, nose down and eyes suspicious of the clean carpet that smelt of expensive soap scrubbed into it by hand.

Mr Berwick wasn't in, the maid politely informed them, but the housekeeper was available if they wanted to speak to her. With that, she led them into a small living room containing a large piano. The walls were lined top to bottom with books, at the sight of which Lyle's eyes lit up and Tess let out a patient little sigh.

'Oh, magnets,' exclaimed Lyle, his fingers tracing the edge of one cover. '"A Study of the Magnetic Properties of Brass Conducted by Mr J. Krebbers, a Gentleman",' he read. 'A timeless classic.'

'It is?'

'An exercise in perfect, scientific futility. Over the course of four hundred immaculately bound and printed pages, Mr J. Krebbers demonstrates with sweeping insight, experimental gusto and scrupulous method that there are no magnetic properties of brass whatsoever.'

'Oh.'

'At least, none worth talking about.'

'So . . . *so* . . .' began Tess cautiously, like a blind woman trying to work out what she's just stood in, 'exactly what were the point in . . .'

'Good morning, sir.'

The woman who stood in the door had a bosom that could have besieged a small castle, a nose like the rocky surface of an Alpine mountain, and hair tied up in a bun so tight it could have

been used for playing the drums. Tess shuffled automatically behind Lyle's legs for protection, and Tate shuffled behind hers. Even Lyle, who usually refused to be intimidated by anything that wasn't actively waving a sharpened stick, found himself tugging at his collar in the face of the woman's expression. It wasn't that her look was particularly hostile. It simply regarded anyone it encountered in the same manner as it would a lump of wood – an inanimate object to be assessed, shaped, ignored or discarded according to its unique, lifeless properties.

'Are you the housekeeper?'

'I am, sir. And you are . . .?'

'Horatio Lyle,' said Lyle, hurrying forward, hand extended. Her eyes moved to his hand, then away, while her own hands remained tightly folded in front of her. Lyle deflated. 'Erm . . . I'm looking for Mr Berwick?'

'The master is in America.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Business calls him abroad; I'm sure you understand, Mister Lyle.' Tess almost gave a start – even the housekeeper was ready with 'mister', as if she had instantly realized that in Lyle's voice there weren't quite enough good vowels to put him on the same level as other gentlemen of the town; never mind that he used long words and his coat was relatively clean.

'He didn't say anything?'

'No, sir, it was very sudden.'

'Will he be gone long?'

'Indefinitely.'

'But he left his books.'

The housekeeper's eyes darted to the shelf and back again, as

if they'd never moved. But that had been enough for Tess to think, *ah*, and feel the start of a suspicious grin. Somewhere around Tess's ankles, Tate looked up through deep, lethargic brown eyes, suddenly more interested.

'He was unable to pack many books.'

'I'm sorry, what did you say your name was?'

'I didn't – Mrs Cozens.'

'Mrs Cozens, may I ask how long you've worked here?'

'Nine months, sir.' She was back on 'sir' now, her voice sharp and to the point.

'And how long has Mr Berwick been away?'

'Almost five months, sir. But I have had a letter informing me of his safe crossing – you may see it if you wish.'

'Thank you, I would like that.'

She didn't so much walk as glide out through the door – if there were feet under her voluminous black skirt, they were doing their best not to be noticed.

The second she was gone, Tess tugged at Lyle's coat. 'Oi!'

'Yes, Teresa?' said Lyle in a tone of infinite, martyred patience.

'Oi, why's she fibbin'?'

'Now let's not leap to conclusions about a highly suspicious and deeply implausible situation coming on top of bizarre coincidence, shall we?'

While Tess tried to translate that into a language she understood, Mrs Cozens returned, an opened letter in her hand. Lyle took it and read. Tess fidgeted at his elbow until he lowered it to her height. As she read, her mouth silently moved with big words like 'the' and 'and'. The letter read:

Dear Mrs Cozens,

I am safely arrived in America, and settled well. My work is going well. I hope all things are good with you in Britain. I deeply miss the country of my birth but business has called me away. Please ensure that the house is kept in good condition during my absence, and forward the correspondence attached here to the relevant addresses.

Yours sincerely,
Berwick

Lyle quickly held the paper up to the light, then lowered it again with an innocent expression as if he hadn't taken even that small action. He looked up to find Mrs Cozens's eyes fixed firmly on him. 'You can see the letter is in his hand, Mister Lyle,' she said sharply.

'Could there be any reason to doubt that?' Lyle replied. He added, 'There was other correspondence with this?'

'Indeed.'

'To whom?'

'A few people to whom Mr Berwick owed money, tying up business affairs. I'm afraid I didn't keep a comprehensive list.'

'That's somewhat lax of you, Mrs Cozens.'

'I do my best, Mister Lyle.'

'Has anyone else been enquiring about Mr Berwick's location?'

'A few friends have called. I've told them what I've told you, sir.'

'Of course, of course. Naturally. Tell me, what has Mr Berwick been working on lately?'

'I believe he was attempting to develop a safer form of loom. He is very entrepreneurial.'

'A loom?'

'Indeed.'

'That hardly seems a useful employment of his skills. When last I heard, he was still absorbed in material properties.'

'I believe he found such study unsatisfactory.'

'He must have left a forwarding address, some other way of contacting him?'

'Yes, I can give it to you, if you wish.'

Lyle seemed taken aback, then smiled and shrugged. 'Where's the harm?' And in the same breath, 'I apologize for the trouble I've caused, and if my tone has in any way been inappropriate.'

'Not at all, sir. It was a pleasure.'

'Nevertheless, I do feel I have been less than cordial in my manner – please, accept this.'

He opened up his palm, and Tess's eyes widened at the sight of a big, shiny sovereign. An indignant squeak tried to crawl out and she put her hands over her mouth to trap it.

Mrs Cozens looked uneasy. 'Truly, sir, there's no need . . .'

'If you do not take it, Mrs Cozens, I shall be greatly offended,' said Lyle.

She looked him in the eye, and saw nothing out of keeping with the flat tone of his voice. Hesitantly, she closed her fingers around the sovereign and slipped it into a pocket. Lyle beamed, and said, 'Good day, Mrs Cozens. I trust you'll give my regards to your master when you see him. Tess, Tate.'

Tate shuffled after Lyle with a bored expression, and Tess followed. However, at the last moment, she hesitated, turned and executed an inelegant curtsey. 'Evenin', ma'am,' she said, holding out one small hand to be shaken. Taken aback, Mrs Cozens shook it and Tess's eyes lit up. Brushing within an inch of Mrs Cozens's wide skirts, she scampered after Lyle and out of the front door.

The three of them walked in silence down the street for a long minute, until they reached the gateway into Gray's Inn, with its stately buildings and throngs of lawyers. Entering the Inn, Lyle, not taking his eyes off the people passing back and forth, said quietly, 'All right, what did you find?'

'Don't know what you mean, sir,' said Tess sweetly.

'In Mrs Cozens's pocket.'

'I never!'

'Teresa, I would never give anyone a sovereign in your sight unless I was sure you were going to steal it off them within a minute.'

'You imp . . . impu . . . you sayin' as how I'm all thievin', like?'

'Yes.'

Tess hesitated. So long as it wasn't actually moving by itself, there was indeed very little in this life that Teresa Hatch wasn't prepared to steal. The cogs in her brain kept moving, and she reached a shocking conclusion.

'Hold on! You *used* me, you did! You gave her a sovereign so as how you know I'd go and pinch it an' all, without tellin' me! You went and were all sneaky!' Lyle beamed, Tess pouted. 'I think I liked you more when you was a soft mark, Mister Lyle.'

'The pockets, Teresa; what did you find in her pockets?'

'I found . . .' Tess rummaged in her own bulky jacket, 'a silver thimble, a roll of black thread, two copper buttons, an old bit of pencil and somethin' all metal.'

'And my sovereign, let's not forget that.'

'I think I must have gone and missed that.' Tess's face was a study of innocence.

'Teresa,' said Lyle in a strained voice. 'Surely with your free education, fine room and board, liberal weekly budget and healthy, full meals provided gratis every day to a menu usually of your own devising, you don't *need* to steal my sovereign, you don't *need* to pick the pockets of strangers. Surely you could just . . . *not* do these things?'

'I only do it for you, Mister Lyle, so as I can keep in practice an' all.'

Lyle sighed. 'What metal thing?'

Tess handed it over. It was the size of a small pencil-sharpener, dull, grey and cold. Lyle felt its weight in his hand. 'Ah.'

'Oh oh oh oh I know what "ah" means. "Ah" means as how you've just got a *clue*!'

'It's a magnet,' said Lyle.

'Oh.' Tess looked disappointed. 'An' that's a good thing?'

'Teresa, who do you know in this life that don't like magnets?'

'Um . . . people who like brass?'

'Think more adventuresome than that. Think brushes with death and disaster, think explosions, think epic toil across the morally confusing landscape, think St Paul's Cathedral and thunderstorms, think . . .'

'*Them?*' Tess had turned white. '*They* don't like magnets, do they? What've *They* got to do with anythin'?'

'Teresa,' sighed Lyle, 'it was *They* who wanted to know where Berwick is.'

Tess stopped dead in the middle of the street. 'Oh . . .' she whimpered. 'Oh, this is bad. Can we go on holiday? That's why you wanted to go out the secret way, ain't it? Can we, Mister Lyle, can we go on holiday? Somewhere a long way away? This ain't my kind of adventure at all.'

'Think of it as . . . as . . .' Lyle's voice trailed off.

'See! They cause nothing but trouble, with their wicked ways an' all! Let's go on holiday; you know it ain't going to be right . . .'

'The question is,' began Lyle in a distant voice, 'why would *she* be carrying a magnet? Is she afraid of *Them* too? But then why do they want to find Berwick?'

'Dunno, dunno, let's go . . .'

'Tess,' sighed Lyle, 'if *They* want to find him, he's got to be in trouble. He's an old family friend. I can't just . . . *not* find out. Not when there's so much I don't yet understand.'

'But he's in America!' wailed Tess.

'No, he's not.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'Did you look at the letter?'

'Yeesss . . .'

'Did you notice the watermark?'

'Erm. Not so as you'd say . . .'

'Chalfont Printers: an *English* paper company. Now, even if I did accept for an instant that Berwick would have gone anywhere

without taking his books, would he really have thought, "Ah-ha, I must pack a sheet of English paper with me to send back to England from the uncivilized beyond"? He's in England – perhaps he wrote the letter himself, I don't know, I'm not familiar with his handwriting. Perhaps he was forced, who knows? But the paper is English.'

At length, in a weak voice, Tess said, 'There ain't nothin' I can say what will tell you how bad this is?'

He patted her on the shoulder. 'It's all right. I already know this can't be a good thing.'

'But you're gonna do it anyway?'

'I rather think I am.'

She let out a long sigh. 'So what now?'

'We go straight back to Berwick's house.'

'An' confront the evil housekeeper lady?'

'Not exactly.'