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Opening extract from

The Extraordinary and Unusual Adventures of Horatio Lyle

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Published by

Atom

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A man is running through dark and silent streets. He knows he's going to die, but still feels that if he's got to die, he might as well die running. In the world in which he moves, this is all a man can wish for, and tonight he has already seen his death mirrored in the death of another. The streets he runs through are silent and empty, their inhabitants either behind dark shutters hunched over their work by candlelight, or out, or asleep, or trying to sleep. He keeps running. A black bag bounces against his shoulder as he moves. He wonders how he ended up this way, and tries not to think of emerald eyes burning in his skull, the heavy weight of the body as it fell into his arms, or the blood now seeping through his fingers.

The rigging on the ships creaks as they rock slowly back and forth in the docks. The water that slaps around their long wooden hulls is brownish and just a little too thick for comfort.

And though he's running, he can't hear anyone following him. For a second he wonders if he's made it, if he's escaped, and knows that it's not that far to the Bethnal Green rookery from here, to the maze of shadows and cellars where anything and everything could disappear without a trace, knows that he could get there, knows that he won't. He half-turns to see if he's still being followed, bent almost double over the gaping knife wound across his belly, and stares straight into a pair of bright green eyes, burning emerald eyes, and a thin, slightly satisfied smile. He chokes on blood and steel and slips down into the shadows, clawing at the fine black sleeves of his attacker, of his killer, blackness that smells of dead leaves in a dying forest and burning wood and salty iron and black leaves falling on to a black floor like a black rain from a black sky and . . . and . . . and

don't look at the eyes . . . He looks. The man holding the knife starts to grin, razor-sharp teeth, like those of a fish, bright green eyes, almost glowing, almost dancing with satisfaction and anticipation. The body slips to the ground. The bag falls off its shoulder and lands on the cobbles with a faint clank of heavy metal shifting inside.

The theatre halls of Shadwell are draining out in crowds of girls and boys cackling and clinging on to each other's arms. The fat man has reached the end of his song about the glory of Empire, Britain's majesty and amorous flirtations in barnyards. This latter aspect is what appeals most to his yelling, swaying audience. Down at Haymarket, the fat woman is dying to the mild applause of the bourgeoisie, top hats on their laps for the men; opera glasses held daintily in white gloves, and huge dresses spread like a map of the known world for the women.

A carriage rattles down a street, then stops. A door opens. A couple of horses stamp their hooves against the old cobbles, the sound muffled by centuries of rubbish and dirt, softening into a brown, thick sludge, through which the grey stones are rarely perceived. A voice says, very quietly, 'Mr Dew?' It sounds like black leather would, if it could speak. A man with bright green eyes stirs in the shadows and carefully wipes blood off the tip of a very long, slightly curved and highly ornate hunting knife.

'Yes, my lord?'

'He is dead?'

'Yes, my lord. He has joined his brother.'

'Very well. Give me the bag.'

The clang of heavy metal moving inside the bag, as it is passed into a hand gloved in white silk and attached to a body

clad in black velvet. The rattle of hands digging through metal. The faint glow of a lamp catches against gold. The rattling stops.

'It's not here?'

'My lord?'

'I said, it's not here!' And now, if the voice sounded like black leather, then that leather had just found itself driven through with nails, and wasn't pleased.

'He . . .' A little breath, steadying against fear of those burning green eyes, above a tight smile that makes sharks seem sympathetic, staring with the hardness of granite on a dark night. 'He said he had it, my lord . . .'

'And you killed him before he'd given it to us, killed them *both*?'

'I wanted to save . . . inconvenience?'

'If we cannot find it, you will pay. They will not tolerate further delay; her ladyship has already been sent here once asking questions!'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Hide the body! *Find it!*'

The thieves are hiding in the shadows under the bridges, waiting for their prey, fingers drumming on their knives. The policemen are trudging through the streets, rattles duly sounding as they whirl them around and announce the hour, long blue coats slapping against their white-clad knees. The horses are bedding down in the mews of Mayfair. The street-walkers are plying their trade in the gutters of St Giles, all false white faces and falser red smiles.

A dark carriage clatters away down a dark street, fading into the thick, choking green-grey fog that rises off the river and

from the factories into an itchy soup in the air. It leaves behind nothing, except a dying gas lamp and a small red stain of blood, seeping gently through the cobbles and into the mud below.

The gas man is putting his ladder against the side of another black pillar along Green Park, and wondering whether his career prospects really do his talent justice. The girl has sold her last little bag of nuts and is going home with her few pennies of profit for the night. The master of the cress market below Shoreditch is laying out his trestle tables for the night's trade. The mechanics are wiping dirt from their faces as they walk away from the seething railway yards of King's Cross, with dirty hands rubbed on dirtier hankies.

And in the darkness of the carriage, a still man with a black leather voice carefully inspects his white gloves by the light of a bouncing lantern, observes a tiny speck of red blood on the tip of a finger, pulls the glove off a long, white, elegant hand, and sighs. He drops it on to the floor of the carriage for someone else to worry about. He sits back, and thinks very quietly to himself, *Soon, we will rise.*

As the driver pushes the carriage on into the night, he puts a hand inside his coat and feels for something to eat. He finds nothing but an immaculately intact knobbly peel from a small fruit, and a single round stone. He curses internally. He tells himself that he shouldn't have eaten the lychee, and throws both peel and stone away into the gutter. After murder, littering isn't really a priority. At least, it isn't tonight.

Almost five miles away, something went *click* in a darkened house. A window opened a few inches, sliding up from the sill.

A hand slithered inside, checked carefully on either side of the window, found nothing of interest except a pair of faded curtains, and pushed up the window a little more. The hand wormed further inside. It was followed by a scantily clad arm, a head, a pair of shoulders and, in due course, the remainder of its owner's body. The shadow dropped on to the floor, and very slowly started to walk. Halfway across the room it hesitated. It squatted down and gently ran its hand across the floor, until it touched a tile which sank, ever so slightly, under its pressure. It moved forward stealthily on hands and knees, avoiding the tile, and the five others its gentle probes detected. When it reached the door, it stood again. It ran a slim blade carefully down the side of the door, felt nothing, and opened it.

In the corridor beyond, a single candle burnt on a table. Nothing else here to give any sign of ownership. The curtains at the far end were drawn, one side slightly singed. The figure moved forward cautiously, and for a moment could be seen by the dim candlelight, before darting back into shadow.

It was short, had no shoes, wore a shirt and trousers that might once have been white, but which now would shame even the most scruffy of scarecrows. It had a tangle of dark brown curls sticking out in every direction from its head, and a pair of intently squinting and blinking grey eyes. It was, in fact, a girl, still young enough to get away with pretending to be innocent, but old enough to be very, very guilty indeed.

Halfway down the corridor, she hesitated, head slightly on one side. She looked up at the ceiling. She looked down at the floor. Then she went back the way she had come, past the door, to the end of the corridor and tried a different door in the oppo-

site direction. It was locked. This didn't cause as much consternation as an innocent observer might have expected. The girl pulled out a small bottle from the deep recesses of a padded jacket favoured by shepherds the world over. There was the sound of something liquid. A smell rose up in the corridor, and a gentle hissing. A little click from the door, which was pushed gently open. In the room beyond sat a huge table, sagging under the weight of apparatus: bottles, strange flasks, tubes, candles, prisms, wires, tools.

The figure moved forward quickly, then stopped. Under the table a dog lay sleeping. It lay on its back, feet in the air, paws folded over, enormous nose twitching slightly, long brown and white ears sticking out either side of its head along the floor. It had the belly of a spoiled animal and the wagging tail, even in sleep, of a very happy one. It had the nose of a creature designed for hunting down prey at great distances, and the girl guessed that somewhere below the huge nose, there were teeth to match.

She watched it for a long while, cautious. Then, very slowly, when it was clear that this animal would wake for nothing (except, perhaps, food and affection), she shuffled forward, half-turning to keep it in her sight, moving a toe at a time. She went past the table to a row of cupboards hanging above a desk, in a corner. She opened them, started digging through, but found only notes, reams and reams of paper covered in an almost unintelligible hand and even less intelligible drawings. She frowned in exasperation.

Not having found what she was looking for, she headed to a side door in the room. This too was locked. She drew out her tools again, inserted the first one, and instantly something inside

the lock flashed bright blue, a big fat spark leaping from the door to the ground. Somewhere above the door, something embedded in the ceiling went *thunk*. Something slow and ponderous began to turn. There was a sound like a marble running downhill on uneven ground. The girl tugged at her tool wedged in the lock, and heard a snapping sound. Pulled away, the end had boiled down to nothing. Not hesitating, not even bothering to waste time on thought, the girl turned and ran towards the other door, bursting out into the corridor, running along it for the window at the far end. At the point where before she had turned back, she ran on, and under her the floor shrieked, making her head shake sickeningly. Somewhere there was a hissing sound and hot steam exploded in a white cloud from the room she had only just left. She reached the window; a dog started howling, barking; she dragged the curtains back, heaved the window open, looked up, looked down.

There was the street twenty feet below, a gas lamp burning steadily outside, cobbles glistening in the rain. The girl leant out, saw a lead drainpipe, reached for it, grabbed hold and dragged herself out of the window until she dangled, feet scrambling against the wet metal. Clutching with hands and feet, she started to ease herself down. There was a long, screeching sound, like a banshee with indigestion.

The section of pipe she clung to lurched, started to bend away from the wall. Where it joined the section below, an unseen tube of linked metal plates started to bend, so that as the pipe fell back, it leant away from the wall like an arm. There was a snap and a long coil of rope, wound into a tiny cubby-hole in the red brickwork itself, started to unwind. One end was tied to the pipe.

It fell back slowly, the girl still clinging on desperately. It bent forty-five degrees away from the wall before the length of rope snapped tense. It stopped moving, and dangled there, the girl holding on to it with every fibre of strength in her thin, unprepared arms, as she wondered what the hell to do.

Around the street, she could hear people stirring, distant dogs barking, carriages being pulled to a stop, breaking their rhythm towards the corner at the end of the road. The window she had dropped from lit up a dull orange. Silhouetted against it was a dark shadow that might just have resembled a man. There was a long silence. Finally the shadow said mildly, 'Are you all right up there?'

'Yes, thank you, sir.'

'You sure? It looks like quite a long drop . . .'

'Really, sir, it ain't nothin' to be botherin' about.'

'Oh.' He looked slightly surprised, and frowned. 'It *was* you trying to break in, wasn't it? Only if there's been some kind of misunderstanding . . .'

She gulped. She could feel her hands slowly slipping on the smooth metal pipe. Falls seemed further when you were short, she reasoned. 'Oh no, no, no, sir! Can't think what you'll be meanin'. But since you happen to be mentionin' this pipe, sir . . .'

A front door opened on the other side of the street. A woman exploded out like a runaway train. She was carrying a meat cleaver, had blonde hair which trailed down her back, and wore a determined expression of bloodthirsty vengeance. The girl on the post shrieked and tried to climb higher. The man in the window blanched. The woman in the street screamed, 'Police, police!', saw the man in the window and gasped, 'Horatio?'

Horatio Lyle, who knew that manners were an essential social glue and that society was a fascinating phenomenon that deserved study and thus, preservation, smiled uncomfortably. 'Yes, Miss Chaste?'

'Horatio, are you all right?' In that split second, her voice had dropped an octave and become as soft as springtime rain, which was clearly disconcerting to Horatio Lyle, who began to reconsider the benefits of society after all. The girl clinging on to the drainpipe tried not to boggle at her.

'What in heaven's name is happening here?'

'Just a little . . .'

On the dangling pipe, the girl, who had been watching all this with keen attention began, ''Bout this pipe . . .'

'Horatio, is this another experiment? Only I do know that the last one went so terribly . . .'

'No, no, I was just ascertaining whether this young lady was or was not . . .'

'Oh, the young lady!' Miss Chaste's voice rocketed an octave, and two hands flew to two cheeks, as if they might burst with appalled indignation. 'She looks in such terrible danger, so distraught! Oh, good Horatio, you must . . .'

'Well, actually, she was in the process of . . .'

To everyone's surprise, including possibly the girl herself, she exploded. 'Please, miss,' the girl started yelling, 'please, I'm just an innocent child tor . . . torme . . . havin' a really hard time seein' as how I've been on the street tryin' to make an honest livin' in a harsh world . . .'

'I beg your pardon?!' squeaked Lyle.

The girl was unstoppable. 'Please don't let this horrid man

hurt me, I never done nothin' but he just don't listen to me and he chased me an' I said how I was lovely really and, please, miss . . .'

In the gloom of the window, Lyle's mouth dropped open. In the street the woman with the meat cleaver hesitated. She looked far too slim and pale to be holding such a large weapon, and indeed now that the excitement was cooling a little, its presence in her hand made her uncomfortable, and she tried to hide it behind her voluminous white nightrobe. Ladies of more decorum might have worn a shawl, and indeed she had considered one when exiting the house. But then, she'd realized who the incident involved, and changed her mind. The shawl, she believed, wasn't her most flattering colour.

Turning a pair of severe almond eyes on Lyle, a useful inheritance from her father and a match for her freckles, she said in a voice like glaciers rolling over a particularly difficult hillside, 'Horatio, is this true?'

For a second, his indignation almost overwhelmed all power of speech. 'Do you really believe that . . .'

'Please, miss,' sobbed the girl, 'please, miss, don't let him hurt me. I'm so hungry and cold and scared and he's such a brutish man, he hasn't heard of Christian charity, miss, please . . .'

'Horatio!' The woman flushed. 'I demand that you come down here at once and assist me with this unfortunate waif!'

'*Waif?*' exclaimed Lyle. 'Miss Chaste . . .'

'Horatio, I shall summon the police!'

Pigeons were startled out of their roosts at the indignant squeak in her voice. Lyle flinched, sighed and said humbly, 'Yes, Miss Chaste.'

Mercy Chaste knew her duty. As the local vicar's daughter, she took an immense pride in her Christian heritage, and had an evangelistic streak in her which had led to a new and interesting reinterpretation of the verb 'chastened'.

A minute later the front door opened and Lyle appeared, dragging a large metal box as if it was very heavy, and after it a tube connected to a large pile of what looked like leather sacking. This he spread out under Miss Chaste's furious eye to a rough square beneath the pipe and kicked the box moodily. There was a hissing sound and the leather square expanded slowly into a small inflated mattress. The girl craned her neck to see the mattress and squeaked, 'I'm not falling on to that!'

Lyle's eyes flashed. 'It's that,' he snapped, 'or the pavement.'

She thought about it, even as Miss Chaste barked, 'Horatio!' Lyle's expression was unshakable.

Sullenly the girl muttered, twisting to see her destination more clearly, 'I think I'll let go now.'

'Why not?' he sighed.

The girl closed her eyes and let go. She fell, and bounced up from the mattress several times. It was almost fun, she thought, and wondered if she could bounce some more. Then she saw the two adults' faces peering down and hastily she crawled off the mattress and picked herself up, putting on her most endearing expression of innocence. Lyle scowled. Seeing this, the girl launched into emergency procedure. She threw herself at Miss Chaste, wrapping her arms around the woman's waist and bursting into tears. 'Please, miss, don't let him hurt me. Miss, please, I'll do anything . . .'

'Oh, for goodness' sake.' Lyle pulled a plug in the mattress,

which slowly started to deflate. As the girl sobbed into Miss Chaste's nightgown, Lyle stalked up to his half-open door, disappeared inside, reappearing a second later. With a whirring sound, the section of dangling pipe started to wind back against the wall, locking itself in place, as if it had never moved.

'Horatio.' Miss Chaste's voice had a tone of determined finality.

He wished he could simper as well as the girl was doing. 'Yes, Miss Chaste?' he sighed.

'What do you have to say for yourself, Horatio?'

He thought about it.

'Erm . . .'

The girl chose this hesitation as a chance for prolonged sobbing.

'You realize I can't possibly permit the child to go home in a state like this?'

Something of the Lyle family spirit flared up in Horatio. Though he prided himself on being able to deal in a rational manner with any crisis from chemical fires to electrical overloads, *some* things were beyond reasonable expectations, and he snapped. 'This child damn well *broke into* my hou—'

'Language, Horatio!'

'Please, miss, I never, I never, miss, I . . .'

'Horatio,' snapped Miss Chaste, 'I think you owe this young lady an apology.'

Lyle realized the girl, between sobs, was slyly watching him through her fingers. She grinned slightly behind her hands. His scowl deepened. 'Miss Chaste, I have reason to believe this young lady may be a thief.'

'No, miss, t'isn't true, miss, I swear! T'isn't true!' And then, fulfilling a plan which had been brewing from the moment she'd labelled Miss Chaste a busy-body, and better still, a *rich* busy-body of total gullibility, Teresa Hatch, pickpocket and burglar by trade and notorious up and down Shadwell, fainted.

And in that part of the city where the fate of continents is decided over a glass of port and a game of bridge, in a room with a ceiling appreciable only by giraffes and a width that would certainly appeal to a small blue whale, if it ever had occasion to see it, a room hung with pictures of fine old men with large moustaches, a man sits at the end of a long, polished table topped with black leather, and says, 'Well?'

'We've just had confirmation of the break-in.'

'And?'

'And . . . we can't say how it happened, sir.'

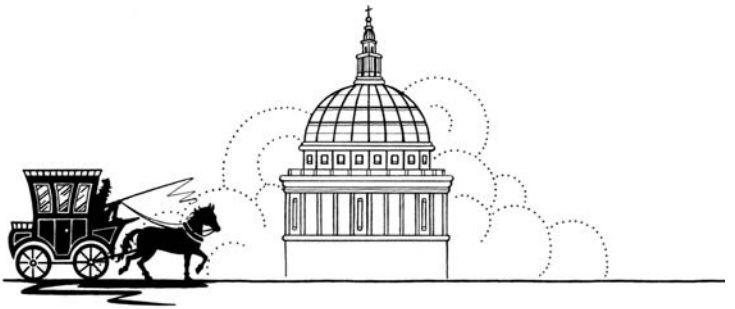
Silence.

'What do you wish done, sir?'

'I wish to know where they have taken it, and what they are planning.'

'Would Her Majesty approve, sir?'

'Her Majesty,' the man replies quietly, 'need never know.'



CHAPTER 1

Thief

The sun rose on the city, and the city rose with the sun.

And someone was shouting, 'What do you *mean*, it wasn't there?'

'I mean the object was not in the vicinity.'

'You have failed?'

'We will find it. Investigations are already underway.'

'Meanwhile, we'll have lost precious time. They will be looking for it as well. By this time we could be in the streets, we could be drowning in the power and dragging this city out of the smoke and metal back into the clean, pure light rather than this black *abyss* . . . and *you* . . .'

'I appreciate that, my lady.'

'See that you do, my lord.'

And in the house of Lord and Lady Elwick, young Master Thomas woke in a large soft bed to the sound of heavy footsteps in the corridor outside. The door burst open and his governess rushed in and said from behind the bed curtains, before he'd even hauled himself up on his elbows, 'Master says you're to be downstairs immediately.'

'What?' he asked, swinging himself out of bed a little bit too fast for his groggy head. 'Why does Father want me now?'

'The whole house is mustering, Master Thomas. Everyone says it's because of the bank. I've never seen the master so angry.'

'The bank? Which bank?'

'*The* bank, Master Thomas! Your parents are going down there immediately to check the vault. You must be up quickly, they'll want to say goodbye!'

Thomas didn't hesitate. No Elwick *ever* hesitated. He stood up and made for the giant mahogany wardrobe on the other side of his large room. 'If they're going,' he said determinedly, 'then I'm going too!'

His governess rolled her eyes when he wasn't looking, but didn't ask what a fifteen-year-old boy thought he could do. He'd just say what he always did. 'If I don't try, I'll never know.'

Which wasn't an answer at all.

The sunlight spread from east to west and crawled through high windows and low windows alike, trickled across floors and ceilings, and brushed the eyes of the sleeping.

Tess Hatch woke, and was instantly alert. *I know it's early in the morning, and I'm pretty sure the house must be asleep, so . . .*

She tried to work out her moves, piece by piece. She was lying on her side, staring at a tall window through which faint sunlight crept, as if embarrassed to call itself morning.

She was in a bed. This caused her sudden alarm, and she sat up, feeling the unusual softness. A *bed*. Not just any bed, but a big bed, with sheets and blankets and . . . *feather pillows* and . . . She looked round the room. Miss Chaste must have been more of a fool than even *she* had suspected. She slipped, utterly silent, out of the bed.

The room wasn't particularly big, the only features in it, apart from the bed, being the large window, a stool in one corner, a shelf laden with books, and a small desk with a mirror above it whose centre had an unlikely and slightly alarming, perfectly rounded scorch mark. Tess was wearing what she always wore – the only clothes she owned: a pair of worn trousers that were starting to give way at the knees and a shirt several sizes too large. Looking around, she saw her padded jacket with holes at the elbows, lying on the stool, neatly folded. She scampered across the room, snatched the jacket up, and for a second saw her face in the mirror above the desk. She hesitated. Her dark brown hair stuck out around her face in every direction, and her dirty pale face, long and knowing, stared back with a surprised expression, unused to seeing itself.

She crept to the door. It was unlocked, which was a surprise. She pushed it open and stepped out into the cold corridor beyond. Floorboards covered with a red carpet, a candle burnt down on a table, thin curtains open across the window at the end

to let in more light. She padded in what she thought was perfect silence to the end of the corridor and pushed open a door that led to a flight of stairs. Slowly, she took them one at a time, testing each to avoid creaks. Halfway down, she became aware of a distant rumbling and speeded up, anxious to find the imagined loot and get out. She went past two landings and into the cold of the basement, where she crept along a corridor, listening for any sounds of life. She heard a fire burning behind a nearby plain white door to her right, hesitated, then pushed it open a little. There was a large stove, open to receive more wood, and a figure in shirt sleeves, black trousers and bare feet, bent over to toss on a log. Without looking up he said, 'Good morning' in a tone of polite disinterest.

For a second she thought about running, but then . . . He was cooking *breakfast*.

Tess stepped carefully inside. The man straightened up, pushing the stove door shut, turned to her and grinned. She saw a pair of grey eyes and sandy hair, reddish in places. He looked terribly, terribly familiar, but she knew, *knew* that this couldn't be, well, *him*, because that wasn't what was in her plan, that wasn't how it worked, not *her* plans, especially not with the bigwig who had paid, not if she was . . .

Tess heard the cracking of eggs and the hissing of oil. She took in a row of neatly tidied desks, a low wooden kitchen table, and a dog bowl marked 'Tate' in large letters.

'Sit down, lass, make yourself comfortable.' His voice was unusual. If she'd been back on the streets with her friends she would have said it belonged to a bigwig, except there was a familiar stop on the 'd's and the 't's, something that was

common in the slums of Shadwell and the rookeries of Soho.

She sat down cautiously. 'Are you Miss Chaste's butler?'

'Me?' He looked slightly alarmed. 'Goodness, no.'

This was possibly a good thing. She drew herself up to her full, and less-than-impressive height. 'Do you know who I am?'

He smiled brightly, and said in a conversational, light-hearted tone, flipping a slice of bacon, 'Who are you?'

'I am . . .' her mind raced and her voice changed slightly, rising a little in pitch and slurring the vowels, 'Lady Teresa of France. I am a guest of your mistress. She's given you instructions as to how I should be looked after an' all?'

To her surprise, the man started grinning, as if in on some secret. He broke another egg into a frying pan. 'Well, I hope you're hungry.'

She folded her hands in her lap and tried to look ladylike, saying primly, 'Tol . . . toler . . . yes.'

'Tell me, Lady Teresa,' he continued in the same jovial tone, pulling a couple of plates out of the cupboard, 'do you always break into the houses of the people you're going to visit?'

Tess hesitated. Then, 'How dare you say that!'

He scraped the eggs off the bottom of the pan and tossed them onto her plate. To this he added a couple of slices of bread, two rashers of bacon, a glass of orange juice and a knob of butter, setting the whole lot in front of her on the low kitchen table. Pulling up a chair he sat down and stared thoughtfully across at her. Finally he said, 'Your fainting was very good last night. Well, you fell . . . went the wrong way – gravity was clearly not the only force at work – but still, the sigh was very effective, the rolling of the eyes, the little theatrical gasp. Have

you ever considered giving up a life of larceny for an age of acting?'

She hesitated only a fraction of a second. 'I was all overcome, see?'

'Miss Chaste was very insistent that you were brought into her house for good treatment and a decent meal. But it would have been wrong to let her be taken in by that trick.'

'If you—' she began.

He ignored her. 'I was impressed, though. More than I've been in a long while by any thief.' He held out his hand. 'Horatio Lyle.'

She was off the seat and had her back to the wall in a second, terror buzzing in her skull.

He rolled his eyes. 'Please don't be like that. Have breakfast.'

Very, very carefully, never taking her eyes off him, she sat.

Lyle sighed. 'I'll keep this simple. I don't like my home being broken into. But when you get a reputation for inventing things, people keep thinking, "Yes, I'll have that", and there's only so much you can do about it.'

'You seem to have done summat, sir.'

'Thank you.'

'Probably got too much time on your hands. In fact, if I can say . . .'

'Thank you,' he repeated. Tess was aware of Lyle's eyes upon her, thoughtful. Finally he said, 'This is going to sound unusual.'

'Is it unusual for things to sound unusual in your house, sir?'

His eyes narrowed. 'That's incredible. Abject terror to insolence in less than thirty seconds. I have a proposition for you.'

She sprang back indignantly. 'That's horrid!'

'Believe it or not,' he pointed out mildly, 'I'm offering you a chance not to go to prison.'

Her shoulders hunched slowly and suspiciously. 'What kind of chance?'

'I was thinking about this after you fainted. That really was impressive, you do know that? I mean, the way you managed to fall at just the right angle to sustain minimum bruising. I wish I'd been less distracted . . . an almost perfect example of moments around a pivot. But then, I suppose, no one really considers the medical consequences of the centre of gravity in—'

'You havin' that bacon?'

'What? Erm, no, I suppose not.'

'Okay. Keep goin'.'

'Erm . . . yes, what was I talking about?'

'How you was not sendin' me to prison.'

'How I was *hypothetically* not sending you to prison.'

'Oh. Like that.'

'You don't know what hypothetically means, do you?'

'You havin' that toast?'

'What? Yes, I am!'

'Oh.' Tess pushed it back on to his plate with a guilty expression.

'The truth is,' continued Lyle, looking slightly flummoxed, 'I could use an assistant.'

'That's nice.'

'Lass, I think you're missing the point and *don't even consider going for my egg, understand*?'

'You sure? Only it'll get cold.'

'I need to keep my belongings safe. I'm also running a series

of experiments that could require the assistance of someone with a very dexterous touch. The problem is,' said Lyle, warming to his theme, 'that in order to measure resistivity in proportion to surface area and density – not together, obviously, because,' he laughed, 'that would just be absurd – but the problem *is* how small you have to get the wires for comparison and the delicate nature of the equipment . . .'

'It really is gettin' cold.'

'And since you proved last night that you are very good at dealing with delicate things – *I can see you watching that egg* – I thought I wouldn't send you to prison and make you for the rest of your life an embittered professional thief with a reputation and long-term grudge against the laws of society . . .'

'That's nice.'

'. . . I'd make you my assistant for the week.'

The words settled over the table like a blanket. Tess sat, fork laden with bacon, and thought about it. 'Uh . . .'

'Lass, I could have turned you over last night. I could still.'

Tess broke into a strained, bright grin. She knew that, in situations like this, you didn't think. You didn't worry about what you were getting into, you didn't agonize over possible repercussions, you just took the easiest way out that you were being offered. 'You've made the right choice, sir. I'm the best in the business, I am.'

'Good.'

'An' at the end of the week?'

'You can go. And I'll give you back your very fine collection of lock picks.'

Tess's mouth dropped open. 'You *pinched* my picks?'

'I relocated them.'

A glower settled over Tess's face. 'You don't try big words like that with me; I know what that means – it means you went an' you pinched them!'

'And you can have them back at the end of the week.'

'That ain't fair!'

'It ain— it *isn't* prison, lass.'

'Fine.'

'Good. *Fine.*'

'So,' she said, brightening with the thought, 'how much was you goin' to pay, sir?'

He spluttered. '*Pay?*'

'Well, seein' as how my services are *so* skilled . . .'

'I'm sorry, I think I must have misheard. I could have sworn I heard you ask *me* for money.'

'At least I *asked*.'

'How moral.'

'I thought as how you might app . . . appre . . . might be all impressed an' everythin'.'

'I think you should probably stick with thieving rather than spiritual appeals to mankind's better nature. Although I do have *one* question.'

Tess's eyes narrowed suspiciously, her fork halfway to her mouth. 'Yes?'

'What is it about my house that made you want to break in in the first place?'

She hesitated, then started to grin. 'You'll pay me if I tell you?'

Lyle rolled his eyes. 'I don't know why I try. All right.'

'It were this gaffer what had a silly name.'

'What silly name?'

'Havelock.'

A sad smile spread across Lyle's face, opening his mouth to speak . . .

And above, there was a knock at the door.

Naturally, Tess thought of large policemen and small prison cells. Then she chided herself for too much imagination, and told herself it was more likely to be the Palace than the police.

As it turned out, she was absolutely right.

The dog got to the door first. He sat there barking, and when Lyle and Tess came up the stairs from the kitchen, he gave them a look of utter contempt that suggested, if they hadn't heard him then they were deaf, and if they had, then why hadn't they run?

'Thank you, Tate,' Lyle muttered, as he walked briskly to the door. The dog lay down very firmly in the corridor and stared at Tess with big, brown eyes in a long brown and white face, his ears sagging on to the floor. Tess stared back at him, keeping her distance. He didn't blink. She wasn't sure if she'd ever seen an expression of such intelligent despair at the stupidity of humankind.

Lyle opened the door a crack. Two men stood outside. They wore long black cloaks, tall black top hats, and the expressions of people with a very specific task who hadn't even *considered* the possibility of not fulfilling their aims.

'Mister Lyle?'

'Yes?' There was a suspicious edge to Lyle's voice that immediately put Tess on guard, and made Tate sit up.

'You must come with us, Mister Lyle.'

'Why?'

'The Palace wants to see you.'

Lyle looked surprised, then pained, then downright upset. 'I'm a little busy. I've got an experiment all set up downstairs, and if I don't do it soon the tubes will be completely useless . . .'

'Sir,' repeated the man in a tone of disbelief, 'the *Palace* wants you.'

He hesitated. 'Uh, well . . .'

'*Sir*.' The word took on a pained quality, suggesting that here was a man who, though about to break Lyle's legs, was at least polite enough to recommend a good doctor afterwards.

Lyle smiled tightly, seeing this, and said, 'Ah.' He raised his shoulders in defeat, put on a feeble attempt at an innocent expression and said, 'May I bring a friend?'

Later, Tess, wearing a dress, sat in a carriage driven by two men wearing royal rings, next to a man whose house she had tried to break into. She tried to work out what she was doing. Next to her Lyle muttered, 'Please don't fidget.'

'I'm nerv . . . nervy? That's a word, right?'

'No, and you're making me nervous.'

'You ain't never been to the Palace before?'

'Have *you*?'

He had a point. She shifted uncomfortably. 'Uh . . . why am I coming?'

'Because I'm not trusting you alone in my house.'

'Can I have my lock picks back?'

'In a week.'

'Why am I in a dress?'

'Because I'm not letting you go to the Palace looking like an East End thief.'

She thought about this. 'But I *am*.'

His look cut her off, and she sat back in sullen silence. The carriage had blinds across the windows and she couldn't see where they were, but the sound of the street was strange, with cobbles instead of dirt. She could hear voices calling out in unfamiliar accents and the hubbub of a distant market.

Finally she said, 'Sir?'

'Yes?'

'Who is Miss Chaste?'

Lyle shifted uneasily. 'A very . . . proper lady.'

'Sir?'

'Yes?'

'Does she . . . you know . . . and you . . . ?'

'Teresa, are you always this quick to dispose of respect and discretion?'

She thought about it. 'Nah. Usually get there faster. But you had me scared for a second, sir.'

He looked slightly glassy-eyed as he intoned, 'She and I are not engaged in any mutual bond.'

'Oh. Thank you, sir.'

He shot her a sly glance and said, 'You don't know what any of that meant, do you?'

'No, sir. But I thought how it might be best not to ask.'

'Does the phrase "repressed vestal virgin" mean anything to you?'

She thought about it. 'Nah.'

He let out a little sigh. 'Thank goodness.'

'You goin' to explain, sir?'

'Absolutely not.'

The carriage rattled through the streets of Mayfair, round the green-brown edge of Green Park where lovers walked in the cold autumnal air and the trees were coated with the soot of the city, towards a black iron gate tucked away in an endless yellow-brick wall, guarded by a pair of black iron dragons, and so across the smooth, worn cobbles of an inner courtyard towards the stables of Buckingham Palace.

They got out of the carriage and walked in silence through a tradesman's door and up a plain stone staircase. Corridors grew wider, staircases became carpeted, pictures appeared on the walls. Beyond a mahogany door, they suddenly found themselves in the very heart of the Palace itself, following a butler who looked as if he'd been mummified.

Tess stared, her eyes flickering from vase to clock to painting to silver candlestick to the butler's gold buttons and back round again. Lyle too looked about him. He reflected on the apparent height of the royal family, that it needed such lofty rooms for its daily living, and whether they'd let him try some of his inventions on their doors and windows. Next to him, Tess had fallen into a suspiciously deep silence. He said mildly, not looking at her, 'They probably change the patrol paths of the guards every month.'

'Why do you say that, sir?'

He glanced down at her. She was trying to smile innocently, and in that neat blue dress – nothing too fine but nothing that would shame a lady – with her unruly hair curled away from her washed face, she *almost* got away with it.

'And if you're considering the rooftop approach, you'd require a stronger grappling hook and tougher gloves than you possess. I hope.'

'Actually, sir, I was considering going to the back door with a basket of oranges and asking for the nicest cook in the place.'

He tried to hide his smile. 'That might work too.'

The door ahead opened, and Lyle was announced by a man in a large white wig who had the expression of one who'd been shown a nit underneath a magnifying glass. There didn't seem to be anyone there to announce them to. But if it made the man happy, Lyle wasn't going to question his purpose in life.

The room beyond was poorly lit and hung with huge red curtains and further portraits, all wearing a Colonel-of-the-Empire-I-kill-barbarians-for-breakfast expression. Lyle squinted down its length as the door shut behind him, saw a grandfather clock clicking away in a corner and, in the absence of any other object of interest, went towards it, fumbling in his pocket for something.

Behind him Tess said thoughtfully, 'Problem is, nothing much can be carried in a hurry, see?' Lyle didn't answer, and Tess walked up to his side to peer at the clock as well, trying to see whatever it was that fascinated him. He pulled out of his pocket a small object that looked like a cross between a compass, a pair of protractors and a fob watch, but like no watch she had ever seen. The needles, as far as she could tell, read '3.23 N 70'. Lyle squinted at it, then at the clock and sighed. 'It's slow.'

He didn't hear the sound behind him, wasn't even aware that someone was standing there. Then when he thought about it, perhaps the man had been there, but so neatly folded away in a chair that he simply hadn't noticed.

'Good morning, Constable,' said a quiet, precise voice. 'Might I offer you coffee?'

They turned. Tess attempted a bob that might have been an illusion of a curtsey. Lyle tried a polite nod, not sure what else he was expected to do. The man nodded in acknowledgement, a tight smile across a tight, bony face. He was short, neat and grey-haired, wearing a black three-piece suit, with the chain of a silver fob watch threaded through his waistcoat. His eyes were so sunken into his pale face that Lyle wondered if there was room in his head for anything else. As the man's gaze swept the two of them, Tess drew nearer Lyle, then realized what she was doing and straightened up to stare defiantly back.

The man looked at them for a long moment, seemed to reach a conclusion and gestured at the long table that ran the length of the room. 'Will you both sit down?'

Lyle led the way to a place near the head of the table, and Tess scuttled round to sit by his side, furthest from the man. Sitting opposite Lyle, the man placed a file on the table and rang a small bell. The door opened, and a butler glided in holding a silver tray laden with coffee, rolls and jam, on a silver plate. Tess eyed this latter thoughtfully. Lyle, eyes not moving from the man, kicked her under the table. She said loudly, 'Ow!'

The man turned an icy stare on her. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Uh, nothing, sir. Cramp.'

'Oh dear. I do wish you a speedy recovery.' He sounded as if he was announcing an execution.

Lyle cleared his throat. 'Forgive my bluntness, but why are we here, my lord?'

The man raised his eyebrows slightly, and a smile like canvas that didn't want to be stretched tugged painfully at his white lips. 'What gives you the impression that I'm a peer of the realm, Constable Lyle?'

'Not a Constable, sir. Special Constable on a good day, which today isn't.'

'What do you believe to be the difference between a Constable and a Special Constable, Mister Lyle?'

There it was, thought Tess. Even this person – whoever he was – said *Mister* Lyle.

'The hours and the pay, Lord Lincoln,' Lyle replied, utterly deadpan. Tess wiped her own face clean. If Lyle wasn't smiling there had to be a reason. She tried not to fidget.

Lord Lincoln nodded in acknowledgement. 'You have me correctly, sir. May I enquire how?'

Lyle hesitated. Somehow 'inspired guesswork' didn't sound as if it would appeal to Lincoln's calculating mind. 'A process of elimination? Your clothes are of the finest cut, there are inkstains on your right hand, a ring bearing the royal seal on your left hand, and your shoes, albeit well made, are worn down hard at the heel, though not the toe. Uh . . . you're carrying a pair of reading glasses in your right-hand pocket and there are a series of slight abrasions on your jacket, suggesting that you frequently wear medals. Erm . . . anything else?. . . you are clearly highly decorated and honoured, yet involved in daily administration. You're *here* and so are we, therefore you are Lord Lincoln, personal aide to Her Majesty.' He smiled, looking nervous. 'Is that right, my lord?' Tess realized she was gaping, and quickly closed her mouth.

'Perhaps. Although it equally may have been an inspired piece of guesswork.'

Lyle's smile grew thin. 'We'll never know, my lord.'

Silence. Then, 'You are a man with a reputation, Mister Lyle. I have a proposition for you. In the Queen's name. How would you feel about serving your country?'

Lyle's expression became a little frantic. 'Well, actually, and please don't take offence, I've got this rack of test tubes waiting back home which will be ruined in a matter of minutes . . .'

Lord Lincoln cut him off with a look. 'Then, Constable Lyle, I will be blunt. There has been a robbery, and an object very personal to Her Majesty has been taken. The circumstances are, to say the least, mysterious. The item which is our chief cause of concern was taken along with numerous other valuables from a theoretically impenetrable vault and is—'

'Not the crown jewels?' asked Tess eagerly. 'Not again?'

'No, madam. Not the crown jewels.'

'Not India?'

'What?'

Lyle tried to hide his grin. Tess said primly, 'I was askin' if someone pinched India, sir.'

'Indeed no, India is very firmly locked in Her Majesty's heart.'

She looked up at Lyle. 'Is that possible?'

'It's not healthy,' he conceded.

'Constable,' said Lincoln, sounding exasperated, 'the artefact—'

'Is it the Fuyun Plate, sir?' asked Lyle sharply.

Tess held her breath. In a voice that reminded her of the men

in a darkened alley with garrotting wires explaining that you hadn't seen nothing, Lincoln said, 'Whatever gives you that impression?'

'The file under your elbow, sir.'

'I see. How much more do you know?'

'Pass me the file and I'll tell you.'

Lincoln's voice could have made salt water freeze. 'The Fuyun Plate is of immense cultural and historical value to Her Majesty. It was given to Her Majesty as a gesture of goodwill by the Chinese government, being a native artefact of Tibet. Legend around it abounds. Its loss is a cultural tragedy. I require that it is found again, and the thieves brought to my attention.'

'Don't you mean Her Majesty requires that it is found again, and the thieves brought to the law's attention?'

'Quite.'

Tess shifted uneasily. The two men were staring, trying to read each other. She wondered why Lyle didn't just say yes, and then they could get out of there. But he didn't even blink. Softly, Lord Lincoln said, 'There is the matter of a salary.'

'Money is of no interest to me. In fact, if it's all the same, I've got a lot of chemicals any minute now burning through a table of which I'm immensely fond, so if you don't mind . . .' Lyle made to stand up.

'And membership of the Royal Institution.'

Lyle didn't move. He looked as if someone had just hit him. At length he said, '*Lifetime* membership?'

'Naturally.'

Silence. Then, '*Really?*'

Lincoln sighed. 'Very much so.'

Lyle reached out for the file. Lincoln put it carefully into his hand and Lyle flicked through it without stopping to read, then said, 'A pleasure to serve, sir. Might I ask – this impenetrable vault – where is it?'

Lincoln's smile could have scared rattlesnakes. 'Where you might expect, Constable. In the Bank of England.'

'*Ah*.'

Taking the case was probably, Lyle would later admit, his first mistake.