Opening extract from

The Obsidian Dagger: Extraordinary Unusual Adventures of Horatio Lyle

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INTRODUCTION

London

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It is said that there are forces beyond any mere man's control. Some call it magic, some call it God, some call it luck, some call it fate. Very few know what it really is. And they're the few who it, whatever 'it' may be, will never change.

It is said that, when everything else is sleeping, the stones of London Town whisper to each other. The old cobbles of Aldgate murmur to the new of Commercial Road, telling them what a world they have inherited, what a place, what a hunger, pouring out their history, whispering with the changing tide as the Thames rolls gently from here to there and back again,

bringing with it little pieces of the world outside, which are quickly lost and consumed in the city.

It is said that, when every footstep is silent, the city is alive, aware, breathing, warning its brief inhabitants of danger coming from afar, and fighting it with the experience of centuries.

Except, perhaps, tonight.

Winter.

In Heron Quays the last coal-carrier looks up as he heaves the final sack of black, lumped will-be-soot up from the base of the barge, just a small shape in a city of ships clinging to the side of the river, and sees, a long way above, the first few specks of snow caught briefly in the moonlight, as they drift towards the river, which shimmers in the dark corners where sunlight never reaches, still and frozen.

In St Mary's Church, Cheapside, the priest stops hacking at the long icicles hanging from his once-white spire, now almost black with soot, as the first snowflake touches gently on the brass bell of the tower, which seems to hum an old, forgotten tune picked up by the bells of St Paul's and St Pancras, which whisper to each other:

Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,
The beggars are coming to town.

The snow is trodden under the feet of the costermongers calling out in Brick Lane and Chapel Market and Whitecross Street and along Poultry and down Maiden Lane, until it is black and slushed and clings to the black ice that hides between the

rounded cobbles for protection against the onslaught of hobnails and chipped leather and baked suede and rolling wooden wheels and iron hooves and bare toes turned blue.

It falls across the light of the single lantern burning in the darkness on the deck of a ship, old and unusually tattered, rigging hanging down as if it has just sailed through a storm, its mast one branch in a forest of ships that sit, creaking to each other about the places they have seen, the spices and silks and sailors and smells that they have carried from Aberdeen to Zanzibar. The snow settles on the deck, where even the salt water, that has seen more oceans than the moon, begins to shiver and whiten in the cold.

The snow falls outside a tall window, through which yellow light spills, eclipsed only by the black outline of a man. For a second the light warming the snow turns red as it catches a slurpful of port, swirled absently in a crystal glass, and the glass hums in sympathy to the voice that says, 'One would have thought, that if they wished to avoid this situation, they would not have permitted him to be moved. It is unfortunate when our allies' failures inconvenience us.'

'Yet it may work to our advantage, my lord.'

The owner of the voice regards the black and white landscape, pinpricked with yellow lamps and dirty candlelight, blurred behind the still-falling snow that blends at knee height with a grey-green fog rising off the frozen river, and wears an expression which implies that here is a phenomenon which, if it knows what is good for itself, won't come anywhere near *his* shoes, and says in a voice colder than the icicles on every uneven roof and tortured drain, 'I will not underestimate this . . . person.'

'Is your agent not competent? Mine is.'

Yellow light turning red, port swirling in a glass, settling again. For a second the moon tries to make itself known over one of the clouds, but if the snow doesn't eat up its light before it can touch the cobbles, then the smoke does. 'He is competent. But . . .'

'My lord?' A voice, not entirely familiar with the sound of English, raised in polite enquiry.

Yellow light, turning red, port swirling in a glass, drunk, gone. A little sigh, appreciation of the finer things in life, and nothing else besides. 'He has an unfortunate inclining that we really cannot countenance.'

'Which is, my lord?'

'Scruples, *xiansheng*.'

The snow builds up against a long window in a tall house that overlooks a steep hill, inside which a voice like marble warmed in the sun whispers to itself, 'So soon.' The owner smiles, and thinks of a time when the snow was heavier, whiter, colder, and there weren't nearly as many fires to drive it away.

And the snow falls on a tall, dark-haired man half-caught in the light of a ship's dull lantern, who says, 'You should not have brought him here, captain. He will cause no end of trouble!'

A voice, fast, scared, teeth chattering in the cold, coming out of the darkness, across the loose rigging and old, battered, salt-stained wood, 'He's safe! I make sure! He go nowhere!'

'He came *here*.' A voice like stone, like the stones around, baked London clay, white Portland stone, granite and scarred limestone, yellow sandstone and chimneys of old, blackened brick. 'You brought him here after he had waited alone for so

long, you brought him *here* and now we are all in danger.'

'I not know, I not know, the man he say . . .'

'Which man?'

'The man! Who come with the letter and say he was priest, and he say he go and see that cargo ready and . . .'

'He's here? Now?'

Horror in the voice, horror and fear, a deep-down true knowledge of what is to come. And still the snow falls on the crooked roofs of Bethnal Green, on the tight, winding alleys of St Giles, on the high peaked roofs of Mayfair, on the carriages of Belgravia, on the dome of St Paul's and the steel slope of Paddington, on the trains of King's Cross and on the barges of the Thames, which gobbles up each snowflake and grows fatter, whispering always the old stories that run from Bromley to Barnes, from Swiss Cottage to St James, from Highbury to Holborn, and say,

Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,
The beggars are coming to town.
Some in rags, and some in tags,
And one in a velvet gown.

And the snow falls between the pillars of the Royal Institute and through the cracks of the collapsing slums of Whitechapel and Bow, on the carts of the costermongers, the laden carts from Dover, the snorting train to Edinburgh waiting for the last passenger to save his top hat from a savage vent of steam, on the top hats and frilled bonnets, on the tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, on the lass selling roasted nuts

in Drury Lane, on the man setting up his stall of dark green watercress while the bells ring out across Old London Town, each in their own little temporal universe that will never agree with its neighbour, telling stories of when the city was smaller than it is now, and the people crowded into the garrets of Holborn, and the world stopped at Hyde Park, where the murderers were taken to die, and the snow falls on an old ship, just one tree in a forest of masts, and on a dark-haired man who's just felt horror and fear for the first time in his life, and realized that, again for the first time, he is standing with his back *against* the light.

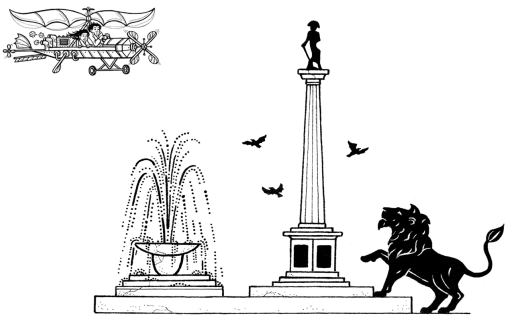
And from the darkness of the thick London night, something rises up, looks around, and for the first time in the city's memory, hears its song, and remembers an older time, and looks down into two terrified faces and remembers the fear and the anger that has been burning inside for too long. And it says, **'You would have tamed me. Learn, even changed with the dark, I cannot be tamed!'**

And, somewhere close, Old Edgar, king of the beggar men, wakes from a shivering, frost-touched sleep under the pier, where the sewers give a little warmth against the cold and the wind can't quite reach its pale blue finger, and hears a scream – and another – above the whisper of the snow and the lapping of the water, which in the places where the sunlight never reaches has already started to freeze. The shrieks are cut off, as if the air that should be rushing by in a high, tight wail has suddenly found itself with nowhere to go. He shivers, and knows that tonight he'll have nightmares to contend with, as well as the cold.

And there is a carriage, snow still heavy on the roof, and a

voice, like rich maple syrup, like an autumn tree bending in the breeze, murmurs, 'Welcome to London, your grace.'

And a man taller than most men, who walks with bare feet on the ice and feels no cold, looks round, hears the hum of the street and smells the darkness and the history pouring out of every crooked alley, off every slanting rooftop, climbing up from every broken cobble and drifting away from every cooling, toppling chimney and says, like a man coming home, *'Yes.'*



CHAPTER 1

Heath

Morning after snowfall was, for a very brief moment, before the feet and the smoke of the city corrupted it, fresh and clean, or at least as fresh and clean as the city of London was likely to get, all things considered.

The bells proclaimed the hour to be eight of the morning, and grey sunlight, embarrassed to be up this late when most folk of the city had been working for a good three hours already on a breakfast of cress, black bread and dripping, seeped across the white fields of Hampstead Heath. It crawled through the old trees, where pigeons nestled against each other to combat the cold; it slid past the high mansion walls of the very rich, which

looked down on the black and grey city sprawled higgledy-piggledy below.

The light drained the colour out of a brown and white dog with huge ears trailing in the snow, that lay, wrapped in a tartan blue blanket by a black tree heavy with snow, and slept.

As it slept, it snored. Loudly. One long ear twitched in time to the tail, the very end of which flexed between the snores in a rhythmical sequence that would have impressed even the most stringent of conductors.

Somewhere, just below the verge of the hill, voices, too lively for the black pall of smoke that rose out of the chimneys below and the heavy, snow-weighted clouds above, drifted into the air.

'I said put it *there*.'

'You said left!'

'*That* way!'

'That's *right*!'

An embarrassed pause. 'Oh.' Then, just in case, '*Is* it?'

'I think you'll find it is.'

'Are you *sure*?'

The dog in the thick blue blanket, which itself seemed greyer for the monochrome landscape, stopped snoring, opened a single lethargic eye, and regarded the world over the end of its large brown nose. Unimpressed, it closed the eye again, and snoozed on.

A man appeared from behind a thicket of leafless twigs, carrying a box of heavy tools and a large watering can smelling of oil. He strode past the dog, oblivious to anything but his task, humming under his breath. His head was bare, despite the cold, revealing sandy-red hair, looking as if it couldn't decide whether to be entirely yellow or entirely ginger and had settled for a

reluctant compromise. His face was young enough to still be deemed handsome, and old enough to be deemed respectable, though he had always suspected that respectability was just another way of paying tax. Grey eyes blinked at the grey landscape, and found themselves uninspired.

There was the sound of feet crunching snow, accompanied by voices, rapidly getting closer. The man stopped to listen, head on one side, as if trying to understand an eccentric social ritual.

The voices drifted closer.

'Well, if you *will* light the fuse what do you expect?'

'I was going to attempt to put it out . . .'

'By steppin' on it?'

'I'm sure it could have worked and I feel sure that if you'd given me the opportunity, rather than just grabbing me in that undignified manner . . .'

Two shapes appeared over the rise of the hill. One, a tall, skinny boy with yellow hair, wore a greatcoat that was clearly designed to give him a certain aged gravitas, but flapped embarrassingly around the wrists and ankles. The other, a girl somewhat shorter and younger than he was, bounded along at a lively pace, and was wearing so many layers of thick clothes in so many faded and stained colours, it was hard to tell where one garment began and the other ended. When the boy spoke, it was as if he had stolen all the vowels from her, so that each syllable dripped good diction, while she often stopped short of a full word, as if expecting any intelligent listener to surmise immediately what it was she could be talking about.

Today, and not for the first time, the girl was dragging her elder companion by the sleeve and, sighting the sandy-haired

man, she called out in a sing-song voice, 'Mister Lyle? That ain't a clean coat what you're wearin'?'

The man addressed as 'Mister Lyle' looked down at himself, as if he hadn't given the idea much thought. 'Well, I suppose it's relatively –'

Somewhere, just below the hill, something exploded. The noise sent birds, sleeping a second ago, racing for the sky, and set dogs barking all around. The shock wave caused trickles of snow to run off the branches of the trees, shook what few withered leaves still remained from the bushes, swirled the powdered snow in eddies and, in the direction of the actual blast itself, lifted up a fat, mammoth-sized spoonful of black earth and white snow, threw it twenty feet into the air, pushed it outwards, and then slowly dropped it down again with a *squishplopsquish* noise.

The dog, snoozing in the blanket, twitched its nose disdainfully, and kept on dreaming of biscuits yet to come.

There was a long silence, while everyone and everything waited for something else to happen. When it didn't, Horatio Lyle picked himself up from where he'd dived on to the ground, brushed the worst of the snow and dirt off his front self-consciously, ran a hand through his hair in a nervous gesture that belied his deliberately calm face, and surveyed the crater below.

When he spoke, his voice had a weary alertness and lilt that softened some vowels and gave some consonants a crippled edge, so that every costermonger in the street would touch their hand to their forehead in respect for a gentleman, and every gentleman would retreat a little polite pace, in suspicion of a man who couldn't quite be of *their* class. It was a hard voice to place, so most people identified it as 'not mine' and left it at that.

He said, 'Now, do you think it was a problem with the chemical composition and ratios, or with the packaging?'

The three regarded the crater a little longer. In his blanket, the dog made a contented snorting noise. Finally the boy, brushing snow out of his hair and off his greatcoat that barely disguised the thinness of his frame, said hopefully, 'Do you think we can . . . have it filled in?'

Lyle didn't answer. His eyes had settled on a dark shape beyond the crater, that was slowly getting closer, and a frown had started to draw together across his face.

The girl, however, turned and stared at her companion. 'Uh?'

'No one need ever know . . .'

'It's a hole in'a ground, bigwig!'

'Perhaps it could serve as an ornamental fishpond?'

'A *pond*?'

The boy shuffled, his feathers rumpled. 'Well, what would *you* do with it?'

The girl didn't hesitate. 'We walk away, all polite, and if any bigwigs send the bobbies after, we can hide out in this place I know 'til the cry's gone down an' then . . . and *then* . . .' she was warming to her topic, '*then*, 'cos you see, I've been thinkin' about this, *then* Mister Lyle can take us to see Paris and Venice and that place with the big castles . . .'

'Where? Specifically.'

'. . . an' when we come back it'll all be better an' no one will ever know.' She beamed, pleased at her idea, and waited for everyone to agree.

Lyle didn't reply. His eyes were fixed on the dark figure who had clambered nearer and was now fairly distinct in a huge black

cloak lined with silk, a top hat so tall and shiny it seemed almost a pity to expose it to hair on one side and rain on the other, and a walking cane, topped with ivory. Behind him trailed a couple of men who had the detachment of people hired to be respectful, but only to one man, and downright offensive to everyone else. As they drew nearer, the dog's nose twitched and both eyes opened. It stared at the man and started to whimper, trying to crawl, if such was possible, further into the blanket.

The girl followed Lyle's eyes, saw what he saw and immediately, without seeming physically to move, attempted to shuffle round behind Lyle and pretend she wasn't there. The boy looked up, saw the man, brightened and exclaimed, 'Why, good morning, my lord, is it not a fine morning for a ramble across . . .'

Lyle put a very firm hand on the boy's shoulder, and he closed his mouth hastily. The man didn't seem to have noticed any of them. He stopped on the edge of the crater and peered down into it. Still examining it, he said mildly, 'Crisp morning, is it not, Mister Lyle?' Somehow, Lyle was always *Mister* Lyle. No one had worked out why, but then, no one had ever dared question it either.

'A little cold, Lord Lincoln.'

'I see you've been conducting . . . experiments.'

Now the boy too began to edge round behind Lyle, and pretend he wasn't there.

'That's right.' Lyle could have been talking about the weather for all the expression he showed.

The man shifted ever so slightly, leaning on his ivory-capped walking cane and looking as pained as his limited range of expressions would permit. 'I wonder,' he began, voice clipped

with vowels so precise they could have taken a job as an acupuncturist, 'was it entirely necessary to conduct these experiments in the memorial flower bed of Lord Wessex's third cousin killed in the Crimea?'

A flicker of something uncomfortable started at the edge of Lyle's eyes, though he tried to hide it. 'I'm sure Lord Wessex's third cousin would have been only too pleased to give of his flower bed for the sake of scientific endeavour.'

'What, pray,' only Lord Lincoln could give 'pray' so many teeth, 'is this scientific endeavour?'

Lyle hesitated. Lincoln raised one – just one – eyebrow. In Lincoln's case, Lyle was willing to believe that the cold menace distilled into that single look was genetic, rather than acquired through the usual hard practice all people secretly undertake to learn how to raise just one eyebrow, and felt his toes start to go numb. 'I'll show you,' he said dully, and led the way.

A few minutes later, when everyone else was gone, the dog untangled itself from the blanket where it had been snoozing, stood up, looked at the crater, regarded the path its master had taken up the Heath, considered its options, and then very calmly claimed a little bit of Hampstead Heath as forever part of its domain.

When that was done, it trotted after Lyle, and wondered what mess he was going to get into today.

Hampstead Heath, which was gradually becoming the ambling grounds of the city rich who sometimes felt the need for a little 'untamed' space, but without straying too far from their clubs, had recently acquired a new addition to its usually austere

hillside. Half-hidden under the night's snow, a straight stone path dropped rapidly through the heath towards the sprawled grey city below. Someone had driven several large roman candles into the earth beside this path, and filled over the many pot-holes with rickety wooden planks, to create an even surface. Standing at the top of it was a large wooden shed, looking as if a gentle breeze might knock it over, with half the main door open.

Lyle stood just inside this structure, and beamed at the thing it held.

The thing was a monster of struts and strains, a body of stretched canvas and wood carved so thin you could almost see the ground through it. The wheels underneath the main body were harsh metal things that gleamed, the two seats were criss-crossed with nailed-down ropes, the back wing stood up at least as tall as the boy, and the mess of ropes and pulleys and struts that pushed at the various crudely attached gears and flaps gave the impression that the thing was merely a prediction of what would happen when the shed that housed it collapsed.

Peering out from behind Lyle, the girl examined it. Teresa Hatch, though she always insisted that she only ever worked on the thing because Lyle paid her three shillings a week and gave her a place to stay, food and, unless she found a particularly good hiding place, regularly enforced hot baths, had to admit a certain attachment to the monster. There had come a point a few months after the night when she had first met Mister Lyle, during an attempt which had gone wrong to . . . *relocate* . . . some of his property, when she had realized that not absolutely everything he said was nonsense.

To Tess the thing was known, if only in the privacy of her imagination, which understood when it was best to be silent, as 'the big flappy thing with wings'.

To Lyle, who believed very firmly in precision with regard to scientific endeavour, it was 'the pressure-differential-velocity aeronautical device' and never anything else, however difficult it was to say in a hurry.

To the boy, whose dream it was and who, as if that wasn't enough, secretly had a poetical vein, it was and would always be 'Icarus'. He wasn't sure why he'd chosen this name, and had the sneaky suspicion not only that it had unhappy mythological connotations, but also that if he dared tell the other two labourers on its production, they would give him *that* look, that two-pronged attack of two pairs of eyes that always managed to make him feel like a five-year-old and want to curl up in a hole and whimper. So he said nothing, and kept his poetic inclinations to himself.

The three of them waited for Lincoln's reaction. Even the dog, who generally showed nothing but disdain for the work of any creature foolish enough to think that two legs were better than four, waited. Tess idly reached into her pocket, and gave him a walnut. He ate happily.

When Lord Lincoln finally spoke, it was so suddenly that Tess almost jumped. 'Tell me – are those things wings?'

'Yes,' said Lyle in the same voice the inventor of the wheel must have used when asked if it rolled.

'Do they . . .' Lincoln searched for an appropriate word, '. . . flap?'

'They do *not*!' Indignation was plastered across Lyle's face. 'They'd have to . . .' the word seemed acid in his mouth, '*flap*

far too fast or be far too large to push a sufficient amount of air to create lift. The wings are shaped,' he said, warming to his topic as he saw the potential to enlighten the ignorant, 'in order to allow for a faster acceleration of air *above* than below, thus reducing the pressure above and creating a difference in the forces acting. You see,' he bounded towards the wings, eyes sparkling, 'the curve of the wing, which I refer to as an "air splitting and differentiating curve", for the simple way it . . .'

'Does it work?' There was a gleam of shrewdness in Lincoln's eye that Lyle didn't like. It was almost hungry, like a starved snake.

Lyle swallowed. 'Well, theoretically.'

'You haven't tested it?'

Silence. Tess said quickly, 'We was testing the prop . . . propel . . . the thing that blows up and makes it go faster, this mornin'. That's why you mustn't arrest Mister Lyle and chop his head off in the Tower for treason, 'cos he was only blowin' up your heath for scientific things and . . .' She saw Lincoln's expression. Her voice trailed off. She ate a nut as a distraction, and gave another to the dog, as if she'd never spoken.

There was no hint of that hunger now in Lincoln's eyes, as the ice settled, suggesting it had never left. 'Mister Lyle. A word, if I may.'

Lyle followed him dutifully outside. Not even the two bodyguards followed, as Lincoln led him into a little grove of dead trees. Lyle was feeling, for the first time, the intense cold of the whitewashed morning.

'Mister Lyle, can you surmise why I'm here?'

An expression of consideration, slightly larger than life, settled on Lyle's face. 'Yes?' he hazarded.

'And are you prepared to renew your services to the Crown?'

Horatio Lyle thought about it. 'Do people still get executed at the royal behest?'

A very tight smile that was an answer in itself. 'Last night in the docks the captain of the *Pegasus*, Captain Fabrio, and one of my own employees, Mr Stanlaw, were killed and the *Pegasus* was holed and is taking on water. She is in quays and the water is nearly frozen, so she does not sink all the way. But her lower decks are flooded.'

'I can't afford to take time out from my experiments at the present moment –'

'I see,' said Lincoln, 'that you persist in having those . . . children . . . assist you. You care for the thief who on one occasion tried to break into your own home, and the young lordling who once nearly killed you. There is much confusion as to why you permit their presence. Is it truly because she can crack any safe in London and he is the next Faraday of his age? Or are you merely a bastion of care and charity?'

Lyle said nothing.

Lincoln smiled. It was always a surprise to Lyle, whenever Lord Lincoln revealed any teeth, that none of them were fanged. 'You are obviously aware of the great benefits in working for me again. The prestige, for one. But naturally a man of your reputation needs a better reason to act, and here is one – there is a murderer on the loose, Mister Lyle. A killer who strikes people down in the dark and doesn't care who they are or what sins they've committed. A killer who is a threat to us all, even the children.'

Lyle didn't move. Lincoln's smile widened ever so slightly, though humour had never entered it. 'Kindly inform me when you've found him, Mister Lyle.'

And Lord Lincoln nodded once, with the same command as the starting gun at a race, turned, and strode away.

Lyle stared after him, and wondered exactly what property of Lincoln's shoes let him glide easily across the snow, where mere mortals would have sunk. Perhaps the snow itself knew better than to cross *this* aide to Her Majesty?

Somewhere, the bells of London started tolling the hour, each in their own, very private world that couldn't agree quite with that of any other clock and argued that 'seconds' were just such an arbitrary imposition on time.

Lyle reached a sudden conclusion. His eyebrows drew together and his lips curled into a scowl. 'Damn,' he muttered. 'Damn damn damn.'

The boy and girl appeared, with the dog in tow, drawn by this mysterious utterance from the trees. The boy, practically saluting, said, 'Sir, I trust that Lord Lincoln is in tolerably good hea—'

'The evil bigwig what does all the evil murderin' and schemin' gone away, 'as he?'

'Yes, Teresa, he's gone.'

'He ain't a good person, Mister Lyle.'

'No. I don't think he is.'

'Sir! He is the Queen's personal aide, a servant of the Crown and the Empire . . .' began the boy.

Tess rolled her eyes. Lyle gave the boy a wry, sideways glance and said, 'Exactly.' He let out a long sigh, looked once more into

the distance as if trying to see all the way to the sea, miles to the south, clapped his hands together to bring himself back to the world and said, 'Right! Get your coats!'

'Where we goin'?' demanded Tess as Lyle turned and began stalking through the snow.

'To look at a ship. Just quickly, then we can have some lunch, and maybe we can go down to Greenwich and see if the hill there is long and steep enough to merit our attentions in terms of a sufficient downward velocity . . .'

The three walked through the snow.

Voices drifted back. 'Mister Lyle, 'bout lunch . . .'

'You can't be hungry already.'

'Tate ate my walnuts.'

'You shouldn't spoil him. He'll get fat and lazy.'

'Aw, but he's just a little doggywoggy, ain't he? Yes you are . . . yes you are . . .'

Together they walked towards the city.

If Lyle had doubts about accepting a commission from the man once responsible for his near-death who he regarded, if not as the root of all evil, then certainly as a branch of the tree, he kept them to himself. After all, there was a murderer on the loose. And Mister Horatio Lyle always liked a challenge.