

A
BURIAL AT SEA

CHARLES FINCH



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This book is dedicated with love to my grandmother, Anne Truitt, who was fond of sea stories. In memory.

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Also by Charles Finch

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CHAPTER ONE

He gazed out at the sunfall from an open second-floor window, breathing deeply of the cool salt air and felt it was the first calm moment he had known in days. Between the outfitting, the packing, the political conversations with his brother, and a succession of formal meals that had served as shipboard introductions to the officers of the *Lucy*, his week in Plymouth had been a daze of action and information.

Now, though, Charles Lenox could be still for a moment. As he looked out over the maze of the streets that crossed the short path to the harbor, and then over the gray, calm water itself—smudged brown with half-a-dozen large ships and any number of small craft—he bent forward slightly over the hip-high window rail, hands in pockets. He was past forty now, forty-two, and his frame, always trim and strong, had started to fill out some at the waist. His trim brown hair, however, was still untouched by gray. On his face was a slight, careworn smile, matched by his tired, happy, and curious hazel eyes. He had been for much of his life a detective, more lately a member of Parliament for the district of Stirrington, and now for the first time, he would be something else: something very like a diplomat.

Or even a spy.

It had begun two months before, in early March. Lenox had been at home on Hampden Lane. That was the small street just off Grosvenor Square, lined with pleasant houses and innocuous shops—a bookseller, a tobacconist—where he had lived nearly his whole adult life. For much of that time his best friend had lived next door to him, a widow named Lady Jane Grey whose family was also from Sussex: they had grown up riding together, fidgeting through church together: together. Just three years before, to his own confused and happy surprise, Lenox had realized how very much he loved her. It had taken some time to gather the courage to ask her to marry him. But he had. Now, in the winter of 1873, they were just getting used to the upside-down tumble their lives had taken. Their house, side by side as they were, had been rebuilt to connect, and now they lived within a sprawling mishmash of rooms that matched their joined-up lives. They were a couple.

Lenox had been in his study that evening in March, making notes for a speech he hoped to give the following day in the House of Commons about India. There was a gentle snow outside the high windows near his desk, and the gaslights cast a dim and romantic light over the white, freshened streets.

There was a knock at the door.

Lenox put down his pen and flexed his sore hand, opening and closing it, as he waited for the butler, Kirk, to show the guest in.

“Sir Edmund Lenox,” Kirk announced, and to his delight Charles saw his older brother’s cheerful and ruddy face pop around the doorway.

“Ed!” he said, and stood. They clasped hands. “Come, sit by the fire—you must be nigh on frozen. Well, it’s been two weeks nearly, hasn’t it? You’re in the country too often for my taste, I tell you that frankly.”

Edmund smiled widely but he looked exhausted. “In fact I wasn’t at the house, so you can’t lay the

charge against me," he said. The house being the one they had grown up in together, Lenox House.

"No? But you said you were going to see Molly and the—"

The baronet waved a hand. "Security reasons, they say, but whatever it is we were at Lord Axmouth's place in Kent, five of us, holed up with the admiralty, the chaps from the army, a rotating cast of ministers ... with Gladstone."

The prime minister. Charles furrowed his brow. "What can it have been about?"

In person Edmund Lenox looked very much like his younger brother, but he was perhaps less shrewd in the eyes, more open-faced. He served in Parliament out of a sense, not of ambition, but of duty, inherited from their father, and indeed preferred the country to London. Perhaps as a result he had a countryish air. He seemed heartier than his brother Charles.

This innocent, candid mien, however, concealed a more intelligent mind than one might immediately have suspected. It had been to Lenox's great shock when he first learned, five or six years before, that Edmund wasn't the stolid backbencher he had always appeared to be, but in fact a leading member of his party who had declined important posts again and again, preferring to work behind the scenes.

Now he surprised Charles again.

"You know something of my purview?" Edmund said.

"Something." Lenox himself was still a backbencher, but could say without undue immodesty that he was a rising man; long hours of work had seen to that. "You advise the ministers, consult with the prime minister on occasion, find votes—that sort of thing."

Edmund smiled again, an unhappy smile this time. "First of all, let me say that I come to ask a favor. I hope you'll agree to do it."

"With all my heart."

"Not so quickly, for love's sake, Charles."

"Well?"

Edmund sighed and stood up from the armchair, staring for a moment at the low, crackling glow of the hearth. "Might I have a drink?" he asked.

"The usual?" Lenox stood and walked over to a small, square, lacquered table crowded with crystal decanters. He poured them each a glass of Scotch whisky. "Here you are."

"There are other parts of my job, that I haven't mentioned to you before," said Edmund after a sip. "A role I play that you might call more—more secret."

Lenox understood instantly, and felt well inside him some mixture of excitement, tension, surprise, and even a slight hurt that he hadn't heard of this before. "Intelligence?" he said gravely.

"Yes."

"What branch?"

Edmund considered the question. "You might call me an overseer, of sorts."

"All of it, then."

"Since the new prime minister came in, yes. I report to him. These weeks we have been—"

"You might have told me," said Charles, his tone full of forced jocularitv.

With comprehension in his eyes Edmund said, "I would have, believe me—I would have come to you first were I permitted to speak of it."

"And why can you now? This favor?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"It's France," said Edmund. "We're worried about France."

“That doesn’t make sense. Everything has been cordial, hasn’t it? Uneasily so, I suppose, but—”

Edmund sat down. “Charles,” he said with a hard look, “will you go to Egypt for us?”

Taken aback, Charles returned his brother’s stare. “Why—I suppose I could,” he said at last. “If you needed me to.”

So that spark had burst into this conflagration; Lenox would set sail twelve hours from now aboard the *Lucy*, a corvette bound for the Suez.

A cool breeze fluttered the thin white curtains on either side of him. He felt his nerves shake slightly, his stomach tighten, as he contemplated the idea of leaving, of all his fresh responsibilities. This Plymouth house—a cream-colored old Georgian in a row, let by the week or month to officers and their families—had in just two weeks come to feel almost like home, and he realized with a feeling of surprise that he would be sorry to leave it, even though he had looked forward to nothing else for two months but his voyage. Then he understood that it wasn’t the house he would miss, but the home that his wife had made of it.

He heard the door open downstairs.

“Charles?” a voice rang from the bottom of the stairs. It was Lady Jane.

Before he answered he hesitated for a brief moment and looked out again at Plymouth Harbor under its falling golden sun, savoring the idea, every boy’s dream, of being out at sea.

“Up here!” he cried then. “Let me give you a hand.”

But she was clambering up the stairs. “Nonsense! I’m already halfway there.”

She came in, pink-faced, dark-haired, smallish, pretty in a rather plain way, dressed all in blue and gray—and holding her belly, which, though her dress hid it, had begun to round out.

For after hesitation and dispute, something wonderful had happened to them, that daily miracle of the world that nevertheless always manages to catch us off guard, no matter our planning, no matter our dreams, no matter our circumstances: she was pregnant.

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning was bright, and now the harbor shifted and glittered brilliantly. Anchored some way out, close enough that one could see men moving aboard her but far enough that their faces were indistinct, lay the *Lucy*, bobbing up and down.

She had come into dry dock some six weeks before, after a two-year tour in distant waters, and had since then been refitted: her old and tattered sails, mended so often they were three-quarters patch, replaced with snow-white new ones, the dented copper below her waterline smoothed and reinforced, her old bolts refitted, her formerly bare engine room again coaled. She looked young once more.

Lucy had come off the same dockyards as Her Majesty's ship *Challenger* in the same year, 1851, and both were corvettes, ships designed not for firing power, like a frigate, or quick jaunts out, like a brig, but for speed and maneuverability. She carried three masts; from stem to stern she measured about two hundred feet; as for men, she held roughly two hundred and twenty bluejackets—common seamen—and twenty-five or so more, from the rank of midshipman to captain, who belonged to the officer ranks. The *Challenger*, which was well known because of its long scientific mission to Australia and the surrounding seas, was quicker than the *Lucy*, but the *Lucy* was thought to be more agile and better in a fight.

In her means of propulsion she embodied perfectly the uncertain present state of the navy's technology. She was not steam-powered but rather steam-assisted, which is to say that she used the power of coal to leave and enter harbor and during battle, but the rest of the time moved under sail, not all that differently than her forebears in the Napoleonic Wars sixty years earlier might have. Using coal added several knots to the *Lucy*'s speed, but it was a problematic fuel source: coaling stations were few and far between and the burners were thin-walled and had to be spared too much taxation lest they falter in an important situation. (New, thicker burners were being manufactured now, but even in her Plymouth refitting the *Lucy* didn't receive one of them.)

Lenox had learned all of this information three nights before from the captain, Jacob Martin, a stern, youngish fellow, perhaps thirty-five, extremely religious, prematurely gray but physically very strong. Edmund said that he was much respected within the admiralty and destined for great things, perhaps even the command of a large warship within the next few months. Martin politely did his duty by welcoming Lenox to the ship and describing her outlines to him, but all the same didn't quite seem to relish the prospect of a civilian passenger.

"Still," he had said, "we must try to prove our worth now, the navy. It's not like it was in my grandfather's day. He was an admiral, Mr. Lenox, raised his flag at Trafalgar. Those chaps were heroes to the common Englishman. Now we must stretch ourselves in every new direction—diplomacy, science, trade—so that you mathematical fellows in Parliament will continue to see the use of us. Peacetime, you see."

"Surely peace is the most desirable state of affairs for an officer of the navy?"

"Oh, yes!" said Martin, but in a slightly wistful tone, as if he weren't entirely in agreement but couldn't tactfully say as much.

They were in a private room at a public house near the water, where many officers regularly took supper. It was called the Yardarm. "I realize there must be fewer men afloat than during war," said Lenox, trying to be sympathetic.

Martin nodded vehemently. "Yes, too many of my peers are on shore, eking out a life on half-pay. Dozens of children, all of them. Meanwhile the French have started to outpace us."

"Our navy is much larger," said Lenox. He spoke with authority—he had read the world's dried blue book (or parliamentary report) on the subject.

"To be sure, but their ships are sound and fast and big, Mr. Lenox." Martin swirled his wine in his glass, looking into it. "They were ahead of us on coal. Our *Warrior* was based on her *Gloire*. Who knows what they're doing now. Meanwhile we're all at sixes and sevens."

"The navy?"

"It's a period of transition."

"Coal and steam, you mean, Captain? I know."

"Do you?"

"I thought so, at any rate. Please enlighten me."

"It's not as it was," said Martin. "We must now train our men to sail a full-rigged vessel, as we always have, and at the same time to coal a ship to fourteen knots under steam even as we fire broadside. Because she's built for speed the *Lucy* is very light in guns, of course—only twenty-or-four-pounders, which would scarcely trouble a serious ship—but still, to be worried at once about sailing under steam, and shooting is no easy task for a captain or a crew. And the Lord forbid you find yourself without coal." He laughed bitterly and drank off the last of his wine.

"I understand the depots are few and far between."

"You might say that. I think it's more likely we'll see three mermaids between here and Egypt than three proper depots where we can take our fill."

Lenox tried good cheer. "Still, to be at sea! It's stale to you, but for me I confess it's a thrill."

Martin smiled. "I apologize for sounding so negative, Mr. Lenox. I've been afloat since I was twelve, and I wouldn't be anywhere else for money. But a captain's job is a difficult one. When I'm on the water all of my problems are soluble, you see, but on land I can think over them and fret and worry myself half to oblivion. Before we leave, for instance, I must meet with the admiralty to discuss the prospects of my lieutenants. I'm bound to break one of their hearts. Well, but let us speak of other things. You'll have a child soon, as I hear it? Might we drink to your wife's health?"

"Oh, yes," said Lenox fervently, and signaled to the waiter at the door for another bottle.

If supper at the Yardarm had been morose in stretches, due to Martin's heavyhearted fears over the future of his service, Lenox's visit to the wardroom of the *Lucy* had been entirely different.

It was in the wardroom where the rest of the officers took their meals. They were a far more rollicking, jovial set of men than their captain, and they had insisted Lenox actually visit the ship by way of introduction.

In the wardroom itself—a low-slung, long chamber at the stern of the ship with a row of very handsome curved windows, where lanterns swung gently from their moorings in the roof, casting flickering light over the wineglasses and silver—Lenox met a bewildering array of men. All were seated at a single long table that ran fore-to-aft through the entire room. There were the ship's five lieutenants, each of whom hoped one day to take on the responsibilities that Martin bemoaned; two marines, dressed in lobster-red, a captain and lieutenant, who commanded a squadron of twenty fighting men in the ship, and were thus part of the navy and not quite part of it at all; and finally the civil officers, each with a different responsibility, from the surgeon to the chaplain to the purser. Each

of the fifteen or so people present sat in a dark mahogany chair, upholstered in navy blue, and Lenox had learned from the rather rough quarterdeckman who had fetched him from shore, none could speak out of rank until the Queen was toasted.

When at last this happened the fierce decorum of the first glasses of wine fell off and people began to converse companionably. Lenox had already forgotten half the names he had heard, but to his pleasure he discovered that the person seated to his left, a second lieutenant called Halifax, was of an agreeable sort.

“How long have you been with the *Lucy*?” Lenox asked him.

“About five months,” said Halifax. He was a plump fellow with a face slick and red from the warmth and wine. He seemed somehow gentle, though—not the card-playing, hard-drinking type Lenox might have expected. His voice was soft and melodious and his face was more than anything of a kind one.

“What brought you on board?”

“Captain Martin’s previous second lieutenant had been lost at sea just before, and I met the ship at Port Mahon to replace him.”

“Poor chap.”

A troubled look passed over Halifax’s face, and his eyes ran along the faces at the table. “Yes. Unfortunately the navy can be unkind. Not all men get their wishes—not all lieutenants are made captain, for instance, however much they may feel they deserve it. Or take my case: nobody likes getting work at another man’s expense, of course, but I admit that I’m happy for the time at sea. Shore is dull, don’t you find?”

“I don’t,” said Lenox, “but then I’ve nothing to compare it to.”

“Very true. Do you fish, at least?”

“When I was a boy I did. Not since then.”

“I’ve a spare rod—you must come with me to the quarterdeck some time.” Halifax smiled at himself, his eyes fixed somewhere in the middle distance. “Watching your line bob along the water and the sun goes down and the ship is quiet—a mild wind, leaning over the rail, cool breeze, perhaps a cigar—it’s the only way to live, Mr. Lenox.”

“What do you catch?”

“It depends where you are. My last ship, the *Defiant*, was broken up, but I sailed with her to the northern waters with Captain Robertson. There you found char, sculpins, cods, gunnels. Any number of things. We raked over a fair few hundred jellyfish. Have you ever seen one?”

“I haven’t, except in pictures.”

“They’re enormous, several feet long. Harmless, though their sting hurts like the dickens. Rather beautiful. Translucent.”

“And on our way to Egypt what will you find?”

A delighted look came into Halifax’s face. “The Mediterranean is a treat, from all I hear, enormous quantities of tuna fish, bream, mullet, marlins, swordfish. A velvet-belly shark, if we’re very lucky.”

“I must strike off my plans to go for a swim.”

“Nonsense—most refreshing thing in the world! If you’re sincerely afraid of sharks the captain will put a net out alongside of the ship, which you may swim in. Oh, but wait—a toast.”

The white-haired chaplain was rising, wildly inebriated, and when he had (not without difficulty) attained a standing position, proclaimed in a loud voice, “To a woman’s leg, sirs! Nothing could be finer in the world! And to my wife Edwina!”

There was a raucous cheer at this, and as anyone might have predicted who witnessed that moment

the wardroom's supper went on very late into the night.

CHAPTER THREE

“Eat this,” said Lady Jane, and thrust out an orange at him.

“For the fiftieth time, dear heart, I’m not likely to come down with scurvy.”

They were walking down to the docks now. Behind them were two sailors from the *Lucy*, carrying Lenox’s effects: a large steamer trunk and two smaller bags. Lenox himself carried a small leather case full of documents that he thought it best to keep in his possession at all times. They were from his brother.

“Indulge me, won’t you?”

With a not unhappy sigh he took the piece of fruit she held out and began to peel it with his thumb. “I make this the sixteenth orange I’ve eaten in the last fortnight, and I’m not even counting the lemon you sneak onto every piece of fish I put in my mouth or those lime-flavored sherbets you plied me with at the admiral’s supper. I’m heartily sick of citrus fruits, you know. If I do get scurvy that will be the reason.”

“I would prefer you to return with all of your teeth, Charles. You can’t blame me for that.”

“I knew I was marrying a noblewoman. Such discrimination!”

She laughed. “I’ve packed a few more oranges in your trunk—eat them, will you?”

“I’ll make you a deal. I promise to choke down these oranges you give me if you promise in return to stay off your feet after I leave.”

“Oh, I shall,” she said. “Shake my hand—there, the deal is finished. I’m ahead of you anyhow—I told Toto I would let her read to me in the afternoons while I stayed in my bed.”

“Dr. Chavasse’s book?”

“I threw that away. *Advice to a Mother on the Management of Her Children*, indeed—that man knew no more about real mothering than Kirk does, or a bear in the woods. It’s more a book to frighten women than help them.”

“But he’s a doctor, Jane, and—”

“And what sort of name is Pye Henry Chavasse, too? I don’t trust a person who can’t have an honest name. Just call yourself Henry if your parents were foolish enough to burden you with ‘Pye,’ I say.”

“I’m not sure anyone related by blood to a man called Galahad Albion Lancelot Houghton can call for such aspersions.”

“He has the humility to go by Uncle Albert, doesn’t he? Pye Henry—for shame. At any rate I don’t need a book to tell me about what our child will be like. I have friends, oh, and cousins, all sorts of people who have been through it before.”

“That’s true enough.”

They turned into a small street that led straight down to the water. It was swarmed with bluejackets in the last minutes of their shore leave, some wildly drunk, others buying shipboard provisions at the general store, and still others kissing women who might equally be sweethearts from home or prostitutes working out of the coaching houses. As he was taking it all in he felt Jane clutch his arm.

“Stop a moment, will you?” she said softly.

He stopped and turned to look at her. "What's wrong?"

~~There were tears standing unfallen in her gray eyes. "Must you go?" she said. Her bantering tone had vanished.~~

His heart fell. "I promised that I would."

"I wish you hadn't."

She put her face to his chest and started to cry. Embarrassed, the two sailors carrying Lenox's trunk and bags both studied a bill of goods in the window of the grocer's they had stopped by, though Lenox knew for a fact that the smaller one, LeMoynes, couldn't read.

"We'll meet you by the water," he said to the men, and shepherded Jane toward a tea shop next door. "Call it twenty minutes."

He knew there to be a private room in the back, and as they entered he handed over half a crown to the landlady that they might take it. She obliged them by leaving them alone.

It was a small room, with Toby jugs—old clay mugs from Staffordshire, brown salt glazed and molded into human figures—lining a shelf on one wall. They sat opposite each other in the low wooden chairs.

"What's happened to make you change your mind?" he asked Jane gently, taking her hand in his.

She wiped her eyes and tried to calm herself. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I know you have to go. It's only—it's only—" She burst into fresh tears.

"Darling," he said.

"I know I'm foolish!"

"You're not. Shall I stay with you? We can go back to London this evening if you prefer."

"No! No, you must go. I know it's important, oh, in every sort of way. And I know you want to go. But it will be hard to be alone for two months, and just when I'm with child."

The landlady came in now, carrying a tray laden with tea cakes, biscuits, sandwiches, mugs, a milk jug, a sugar pot, and a teakettle. She avoided looking at them as she transferred the tray's contents to their small table with rapid precision. "And take your time," she said before she hurried out.

When they had discovered Jane was pregnant, a week or so after Lenox had committed to this trip for his brother, both had been immensely happy. Strangely it wasn't the chattering, social sort of happiness their marriage had been: both found in the next days that more than anything they would prefer to sit on the sofa together, not even talking much, perhaps reading, eating now and then, holding hands. It was a joy both of them preferred to experience almost silently, perhaps because it was so overwhelming.

When it occurred to Lenox that leaving might mean missing two months of that joy, he had immediately decided that he wouldn't do it. In fact it had been she who convinced him he still must go after he told her the reason Edmund had asked. Since then she had always been staunchly in favor of the voyage. This was the first hint to Lenox that she felt otherwise.

Sitting at the table, looking despondent, not touching the steaming cup of tea in front of her, Jane said, "This is silly—we'll be late. We should go."

"I'd rather sit here," he answered. "Will you eat something?"

"No."

"I should, then."

He picked up a sandwich with butter and tomato on it, no crusts, and took a bite. He found that he was hungry—the orange was still in his jacket pocket, half peeled—and when he had finished the sandwich he took a tea cake too and started to butter it.

Through her tears she smiled. "You can always eat, can't you?"

He stopped chewing his cake in the middle of a bite and, with a look of surprised innocence, said, "Me?"

"You, Charles Lenox. I remember you as a seven-year-old, stuffing your face with slices of cottage pie when you thought nobody was looking, on hunt days."

They laughed. Tenderly, he put his hand to her stomach. "I'll be back soon, you know."

"I worry you won't come back at all. What do you know about a ship, Charles?"

"Ever so much now. How many sails it has, what it's made of, who all the officers are, what the midshipmen do, where one sleeps and eats..."

"I don't mean that. I mean you're liable to fall off and vanish into the ocean because you thought you could lean on the railing..." She trailed off and gave him a miserable look.

"You can't think how careful I'll be, Jane," he said, and again grasped her hand.

"I'll worry myself sick, is all I know."

"I'll write to you."

She rolled her eyes. "That will do me no good—you'll beat your letters home, I'm sure."

"It's not a far sail, and the weather is calm. Captain Martin has a great deal of experience. She's a good ship."

"Oh, I know all that! Am I not allowed to be irrational once in a while?"

"You are, to be sure you are."

To his sorrow their conversation progressed this way and ended inconclusively, as he promised again and again to be safe and avowed his disappointment at missing two months of her company, and as she said again and again that well, it was all right, even though plainly it wasn't.

Just as they absolutely had to leave, however, she reached up for his cheek and gave him a swift kiss. "It's only because I love you, Charles," she whispered.

"And I you."

They went out and walked the final street that slanted sharply down to the docks, which were loud with bickering voices and smelled of heat, fish, salt, wood, and rope.

He took some mild solace in thinking of the letter he had left behind on her pillow in London: it was a very good sort of letter, long and full of thoughts and declarations of love and speculation about what their child would be like and ideas for what they might do when he returned to London. She would be comforted by that at least. He hoped.

They found the sailors with Lenox's effects, and then Lady Jane pointed off to the right.

"Look, there they are—your brother and Teddy. The poor boy looks green with fear." She looked up at him. "I still find it difficult to believe you and your nephew will be novices aboard the same ship, don't you?"

CHAPTER FOUR

This was indeed the case. Lenox had discovered it during the course of his fateful conversation with Edmund two months before. On that snowy evening the older brother had offered the younger an explanation of his request.

“We’ve had a disaster, Charles. That’s why I’ve been in these meetings with the prime minister.”

“What happened?”

Edmund sighed and rubbed his eyes, weary from long days and worry. He took a deep sip of whisky. “What do you know of our intelligence systems?”

“Very little. What they say in the papers, perhaps a bit more.”

“Our officers are all across Europe, of course, Charles,” said Edmund, “and despite this peace—the tenuous peace—many of them are still concentrated in and around France. The prospect of another war is very real, you should know.

“Eight days ago an Englishman named Harold Rucks, resident in Marseille, was found dead in his bedroom above a brothel near the docks. He had been stabbed in the heart, and the woman who worked from that room—a new recruit to her work, you’ll note—was nowhere to be found.”

“I take it he was one of your men?” said Charles.

“Yes. In Marseille he was considered a simple expatriate drunk, but that was merely the façade he had adopted. He was quite a competent man, if violent-tempered. At first we considered the possibility that he had died in an argument over something personal—money, let’s say, or indeed what he was paying for—but the next day another Englishman died, this time in Nîmes. His name was Arthur Archer. He was garroted in an alleyway. Nasty death.”

“I see.”

“You can guess what happened then. Three more men, two in Paris, one in Nice. All dead. Five of ours.”

“How were their identities discovered?”

Edmund sighed and stroked his cheek pensively, looking for all the world like a farmer anxiously watching over crops. But these were higher stakes.

“A list went missing from our ministry. Eight names on it. The three who weren’t killed were fortunate: two were back in England, one who just managed to get out of Paris with his life, though he left all of his possessions behind. He was fired upon as he got into the ferry.”

“The French mean business.”

“You can see that the peace is ... a complex one,” said Edmund with a wry smile. He took another sip of his drink. “What’s fortunate is that none of them were tortured for information. There’s some evidence that Archer was to be kidnapped, but struggled enough that they simply killed him. The same may be true of one of our men in Paris, Franklin King.”

“Does this mean that someone in our government is working for the French?”

“I fear it does. We’re looking into it, you may rely on that.”

“Treason.”

“Yes. We haven’t found the man yet, but we will, and in the meantime all of our activities—our intelligence activities—have been suspended.” Edmund looked uneasy then. “Well. Except for one.”

“Egypt.”

The brothers sat in silence for a moment. Charles, for his part, was knocked backwards, though through some ancient childhood wish to seem strong to his older brother, he acted calm. But he had had no idea that such arcane and troubling matters fell within his brother’s bailiwick. Edmund had been a good member of the party, but devoted his time (as far as anyone knew at least) to broad public issues like voting or the colonies.

Worse still, he saw that it was taking a toll on Edmund, who looked tired and dogged with worry.

As if sensing Charles’s thoughts, Edmund said, “I didn’t ask for the responsibility, but I couldn’t decline it, could I?”

“No. Of course not.”

“You see the problem.”

“Well, tell me,” said Charles.

“We don’t know how much information the French have. Is it everything, every name? Are they sticking to this list of eight men to make it seem that they know less than they do? Or do they really know nothing beyond those eight names?”

“We need to find out what they have, then.”

Edmund rolled his eyes. “They need ice water in hell, too, but I doubt they get much of it.”

“Tell me about Egypt.”

“In our disarray we’ve accepted that we must sacrifice certain knowledge we had hoped to acquire about the French munitions, their navy, so forth and so on. Rucks was particularly well placed to study their navy, being in a port city, but so be it. Still, there’s one thing we must know.”

“Yes?”

“Whether the French mean to strike at us preemptively. To start another war.”

“They wouldn’t. It wouldn’t be in their interests, would it?” said Charles.

As Edmund pondered how to answer this question the fire shifted, a log breaking in half. Both men stood up and started to fiddle with it, one with the poker and the other with a sort of long iron claw that could pick up bits of wood.

“We’ve still the finest navy that has ever gone afloat,” Edmund said at last, “but the margin is shrinking, I can tell you frankly, and on land they may be just as strong as we are. The colonies have spread us a bit thin. If they have any ambitions of greater power ... let’s say it’s not impossible.”

“I see.”

“Making matters worse, of course, is that we still don’t know quite where we are with the government. Napoleon the Third has been gone for three years now—and for that matter died in January—and this third republic is unpredictable. We can never be sure whose voice matters there. We had thought these *bouleversements* might cease, but the deaths of our men ... this is where we need you to step in.”

“How?”

“We have a man in place in the French Ministry of War, working directly under Cissey, their *secrétaire d’état de la guerre*. This fellow is very high up, very clever, but rather poor. Despite the death of the empire it’s mostly the aristocrats who work in their government as I understand.”

“How unfamiliar,” said Lenox.

Edmund laughed. “Well, quite so. Not all that different from here, I suppose. This chap is not an aristocrat. He’s clever, though, and he’s a mercenary. For money he’ll tell us all we need to know.”

about the new government's intentions."

"How much?"

Edmund quoted a figure that made Charles whistle. "It's not ideal. A man you have to pay is much less reliable than a man who burns with patriotic fervor, but so be it."

"How do you know he's not acting under orders, Ed? Playing a double game?"

"We have other informants, men who would know if that were the case. But they're not at so high a level as this gentleman."

Charles sat down again and for a moment brooded over all this. "You're in disarray, then," he said at last, "and need someone the French couldn't possibly have on any ... any list of names?"

"Precisely. We need someone who can go to Egypt in a public guise."

"Why Egypt?"

"We don't dare send anyone to France, because of course they'll be on guard at such a tense and decisive moment. But this French gentleman, the one who can pass us information, has business interests that may plausibly conduct in Suez."

Charles saw all now. "And you thought you would send me to the canal as a member of Parliament—but in fact to meet this gentleman?"

Edmund nodded, and then, with a look of eagerness that made his younger brother nearly smile, said, "What do you think?"

"I'll do it, of course."

"Excellent. What a relief that is."

This puzzled Charles. "Why?"

"Well—because we need someone we trust."

"There are other men in Parliament who would do it, I imagine."

"But we don't want a man without any special loyalty to Gladstone and the current government. We must have this information—this power over the leadership of the party, you see. You're my brother, and it's our luck that on top of that you're a clever and discreet member."

"Thank you, then."

A brief pause. "There one thing I've omitted, however."

Lenox had felt it coming. "Oh?"

"We would ask that you go on the *Lucy*. Does the name ring a bell?"

"Vaguely."

Edmund looked uncomfortable now. "It will be Teddy's first ship, you see."

Indignation filled Lenox.

Teddy was his—very beloved—nephew, Edmund's second son, who had been groomed, like many of his mother's clan, which had seemingly a hundred admirals lurking in its family tree, to enter the navy at a young age. He had recently turned fourteen, and was just now ready to become a midshipman.

"So there's no special task," said Charles. "You don't need me. You simply want a babysitter."

"No, no!" Edmund, to his credit, looked horribly unhappy. "I feared you would take it this way."

"I don't mind, of course. I'll do it. But I wish you had been honest."

"Charles, no! I view this as nothing more than a lucky coincidence. Your primary job will be to meet our French contact in Egypt, and make some sort of trumped-up speech we give you as cover for that job."

"Oh, is that to be my 'primary' job?" Charles said, hearing the bitterness in his own voice.

"Listen, Charles—if this doesn't convince you nothing will. It wasn't I who brought your name up

Gladstone did.”

This gave Lenox pause. “The prime minister? Asked for me?”

“Yes. And he had no idea that Teddy would be on our next ship to Egypt, either.” Edmund looked hopefully up at Charles, who was pacing toward the snow-covered window. “He likes you. And to be certain, it helped that you were my brother—someone we could trust. But he wouldn’t send an incompetent for loyalty’s sake.”

“Hmm.”

“Charles, listen to reason. England needs you. This may be the most important thing you do, you know.”

“A lucky coincidence?”

“I swear,” said Edmund.

“Well, I would have done it either way,” Charles said ruminatively. Then, pouring two more glasses of whisky, he added, “By name, the prime minister asked for me?”

CHAPTER FIVE

Lady Jane waved a hand and called out to her brother-in-law. “Edmund! Teddy!”

The father and son turned around and when they saw Lenox and Lady Jane, both smiled. Edmund’s grin was broad and happy; Teddy’s less enthused. He did look greenish.

“Hello, Uncle Charles,” he said when they were in earshot. “And Aunt Jane.”

Everyone shook hands. Edmund really was beaming, but in a low voice he said to Charles, “Remind me to speak to you for a moment before you go.”

“Are you ready to ship out?” Lady Jane asked Teddy, tapping him on the shoulder in what she must have imagined to be a hearty fashion.

He clearly longed to say that he wasn’t, but instead choked out the word, “Yes,” with something less than perfect zeal.

“And are you, Charles?” said Edmund.

“I am. I’m also ready to be back in London, strangely enough.”

Lady Jane squeezed his hand.

The men who had been carrying Lenox’s things had touched their caps and then vanished back into the streets of Plymouth (and, suspiciously, given that they were due on the *Lucy* soon, in the direction of a public house). The family stood alone over two trunks and four or so bags, waiting.

Off to their right was the massive, shamrock-green field where Sir Francis Drake had with famous tranquility played bowls while the Spanish armada loomed offshore, on the way to the rollicking victory that Drake ultimately bestowed upon them. Lenox had walked over it several times in the past two weeks, twice with Lady Jane, and in the twilight of evening contemplated all sorts of things: seafaring, wives left at home, children, French spies. To the left was the dock that the famous settlers of America had left from, aboard the *Mayflower*.

Closer at hand was the intense activity of the docks. Every day Plymouth handled naval ships, commercial freighters, and several unsavory varieties of black-market transaction that just about managed to avoid the observation of the local constabulary. Men swarmed around them, voices rose at the middle distances, wood smacked against wood. It suddenly felt much more real, this sea voyage than it had half an hour before.

The two brothers, Teddy, and Lady Jane waited by slip nineteen, and about five hundred yards off they saw the men who were coming to fetch them. They were easy to spot, these two, because the jolly boat (belonging to the *Lucy*, pitched up sideways alongside deck during voyages) was a vividly striped yellow and black, with its name, *The Bumblebee*, scrawled in large letters on one side. It certainly stood out among the dozen odd brownish boats near it. Idly Lenox wondered whether it attracted attention when the *Lucy* wanted to be stealthy, but perhaps she was too fast a ship, designed for speed as she was, to worry much about that: nothing with very heavy guns would be able to catch her in a fair race.

“Not long now,” said Edmund.

Charles felt his stomach turn over. “Perhaps Jane and I will take a short walk,” he said.

“Of course, of course.”

They went toward Drake’s lawns, and managed to escape in some small degree the din of the dock. As they walked they spoke to each other in low, earnest voices, saying nothing much and repeating over and over, all of it tending toward the incontrovertible truth that they loved each other; that they loved the child they would have; that all would be well, even if it seemed bleak at the moment.

Feeling slightly better, they returned to find the *Bumblebee* tied on to shore and two able seamen transferring trunks and bags into its deep middle section. (Captain Martin had permitted Teddy Lenox to come on board with his uncle, but with the caveat that once the boy stepped on the deck of the *Lucretia* all such preferential treatment would be terminated.) Not long now.

At the last moment Edmund pulled his brother aside, producing a thin sheaf of documents from some inner pocket of his jacket. “Here they are—your orders. Secure them somewhere in your cabin that nobody can find, even your servant, if it’s possible.”

“I thought I had the information already?” said Lenox, puzzled.

Edmund shook his head. “Those pages were a dummy. We wanted to leave off committing any fact to paper until the last possible moment. You can get rid of those.”

“Very well.”

“Be safe, Charles. On board and on land.” A pained look came into Edmund’s eyes. “And if you could—if it’s not trouble—not that I would ever ask you...”

Lenox laughed. “I’ll look after Teddy, Edmund. I swear.”

Edmund laughed too, but looked colossally relieved. “Good. Excellent. I want to see you both back safe, soon.”

“You shall.”

Before either of them knew it, Charles and his nephew were in the *Bumblebee*, and while Lenox could still feel Lady Jane’s final kiss on his cheek, they cast off. Both Lenoxes sat at the rear of the boat gazing back at Edmund and Jane, who stood on shore and waved them off. With the two powerful men rowing the *Bumblebee* Charles’s wife and his brother were soon indistinct among the hordes on the dock, and then it was impossible to see whether they had even remained by the slip where they had said good-bye. But only when there was really no possibility of making out who was who, or who was waving, or even whether any figure on land was a man or a woman or a shaved ape, did the two turn and look at their ship.

Teddy was a creature Lenox had always loved—a good-spirited, mischievous, endearingly freckled blond boy—but now Lenox realized that his nephew had come at least partially into manhood, and that alchemical process become a mystery.

“Well,” he said, “are you ready? Or were you being brave?”

Teddy, looking queasy, said with winning honesty, “Being brave.”

Lenox clapped a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “In a day’s time you won’t be able to remember feeling frightened.”

Teddy nodded but didn’t look as if he believed a word of it. “William says the food will be terrible.”

This was Teddy’s older brother, a pupil at Harrow now. “I have some provisions,” Lenox answered in a mild way. “You shan’t go hungry while I’m on board. But no word of it to the captain, d’you hear?”

The boy managed a smile. It was wiped off when they came up alongside the ship, and a row of men leaning on the railing cackled and shouted.

“This little white-faced beggar won’t see much more of the world, I reckon,” one called out,

general merriment.

Charles and Teddy climbed the rigging and as they neared the deck rough hands took them under the arms and pulled each up over the gunwale in turn, and onto the *Lucy's* main deck. To Lenox they were courteous, and he even heard one murmur to another, "Which he's the member of Parlyment" but Teddy received no such deference. There were exaggerated sweeps of the cap to greet him, and an equally exaggerated, "Hello, *sir*," followed by laughter.

Two sorts of midshipmen went to sea: college boys and practicals. The practicals were often from a slightly lower segment of the upper and middle classes, but they had the advantage of knowing the ship and the navy backward and forward, having been in it for many years: since the age of ten, say. They all displayed a deep reluctance to admit the college lads, who had a great deal of classroom learning but very little practical training, and that all done on a battered-up old frigate in the harbor at Portsmouth, as their peers. Yet it was the college boys who would ultimately ascend the highest ranks through their superior education and interest at the admiralty. This was considered unfair. Teddy, who was fourteen, could speak French, navigate by the stars, do math, and tie any sort of hitch or knot you pleased—the Matthew Walker, the Turk's head—but his experience at sea was almost nil. Like the other men in his mother's family he would likely be an admiral one day; for now he was almost certainly bound to be an object of scorn.

All this Lenox had heard from Edmund, whom it quite clearly pained, but the truth of it hadn't been clear until now. The quicker-witted bluejackets made flippant, ostensibly respectful remarks to the boy, and Lenox spotted another midshipman some yards off, laughing into his sleeve.

"Enough!" a voice barked out. It was the captain. "Mr. Lenox, you are very welcome on board. Mr. Midshipman, report to the gun room immediately. As for you lot, back to work."

Without any grumbling the men dispersed across the ship, and Teddy, whose trunk and baggage preceded him, went off obediently to find his way below deck.

"You know the way to your quarters, I believe?" the captain asked Lenox. "I would show you myself, but there's a great deal to be done before we may ship. Your man should be there, unpacking your things."

"Thank you, Captain."

When he was alone, Lenox had a chance to look over the *Lucy*. It was in a wondrously clean and tight-rigged state; he had thought on his previous visit that the ship had been well maintained but saw now that he had actually witnessed her in a state of almost unprecedented laxity. There wasn't a rope out of place, nor a blemish on the great polished quarterdeck. The sails were either aloft or furled tightly to the masts. Everything was in faultless order, and for the second time that day he thought that traveling to Egypt by sea might be not any kind of ordeal, as he had feared, but a real pleasure.

What he couldn't know, of course, was that the first murder was less than a day away.

CHAPTER SIX

The *Lucy* left Plymouth Harbor under steam (somewhere below deck—Lenox suspected it was in the orlop, but couldn't feel sure—men were shoveling coal as if their lives depended on it) about an hour later. It was nearly five in the afternoon, and in a cloudless sky the great yellow sun had just begun to mellow into orange and broaden toward the curve of the earth.

When they reached open water Captain Martin ordered the jibs and staysails set. This request precipitated a profound flurry of action and movement among the men at the fore of the ship, and somewhat stupefied Lenox, ignorant of shipboard terminology, managed to ask his friend Halifax what the directive meant.

They were on the quarterdeck, that deck of the ship, six steep steps up from the main deck, that was reserved for officers. (It was the sole privilege of the midshipman's life on board that he could walk on the exalted planks of the quarterdeck; otherwise he slept in a hammock like a common bluejacket and took rather worse food.) Captain Martin had, as was common when dignitaries sailed with the navy, invited Lenox to use it, though he had advised Lenox that the poop deck, one level higher up, was, while not technically off-limits, a place in which he might make mischief among men at work.

"Quite without meaning to, of course," Martin had said over that supper of theirs at the Yardarm.

"I understand, of course. I should never like to be underfoot."

When Lenox asked Halifax what it meant to set the jibs and staysails, the officer pointed toward the fore of the *Lucy*. "If you look toward the bowsprit—"

"The bowsprit?" said Lenox.

Halifax laughed his melodious laugh. "I had forgotten there were men who didn't know what a bowsprit was," he said, and then, seeing Lenox redden, said, "No, my dear man, I value you for it! The navy can be a confinement, if you let yourself fall oblivious to its limitations. But listen: I imagine you saw the great spar—the great pole—that extends off the prow of the ship?"

"Of course," said Lenox, still stung.

"That is the bowsprit. There are three sails that may be run up from it, all of them triangular—the flying jib, which is farthest out, and two staysails. Can you see?"

"Oh, yes, now I can."

Of course he could, and felt stupid that he hadn't been able to locate the object of so many men's attention. Two sailors were all the way out along the bowsprit, hung upside down over the water in a way that looked extremely dangerous. Neither kept more than a casual hand on the spar, however, instead primarily using the strength of their legs to hang on.

"What are they for, these sails?" Lenox asked.

"In a medium wind like this—"

"Medium!"

"What would you have called it?"

"A stiff wind—very stiff indeed."

"Oh, dear," said Halifax feelingly, and Lenox could see that he had committed another solecism.

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