

A Burial at Sea: A Mystery (Charles Finch Mysteries)

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Charles Lenox, Member of Parliament, sets sail on a clandestine mission for the government. When an officer is savagely murdered, however, Lenox is drawn toward his old profession, determined to capture another killer.

1873 is a perilous time in the relationship between France and England. When a string of English spies is found dead on French soil, the threat of all-out war prompts government officials to ask Charles Lenox to visit the newly-dug Suez Canal on a secret mission.

Once he is on board the *Lucy*, however, Lenox finds himself using not his new skills of diplomacy but his old ones: the ship's second lieutenant is found dead on the voyage's first night, his body cruelly abused. The ship's captain begs the temporarily retired detective to join in the hunt for a criminal. Lenox finds the trail, but in the claustrophobic atmosphere on board, where nobody can come or go and everyone is a suspect, he has to race against the next crime-and also hope he won't be the victim.

At once a compulsive murder mystery, a spy story, and an intimate and joyful journey with the Victorian navy, this book shows that no matter how far Lenox strays from his old life, it will always come back to find him.

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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 thin 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 thin 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. This 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 houses, 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 their 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 that 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 in 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 jocularity.

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 responsibility. 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.

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