

CHAPTER one

Setting our scene just north of the United States, at the Esquimalt harbor on the Pacific Ocean, where at the time of Mr. Dickens's American tour the English naval flagship H.M.S. Zealous is anchored off Victoria Island, British Columbia. On board, a call for Sydney Dickens, twenty years old, Sub-Lieutenant.

CLEAR LOWER deck, lay aft!

Commander Liddell, captain of the warship *Zealous*, waited for the sailors and marines to muster in response to the piped command. The captain was a markedly old man, the type who if not in military service would be confined somewhere in bed. He was permanently bent from more than fifty years at sea and it was said some portion of that bending had occurred in the Napoleonic Wars next to Lord Nelson. Whenever asked the current date, Liddell would shout, “eighteen hundred and war!”

Crew assembled, Liddell passed along the instructions of the admiral of their Pacific fleet. The admiral, Liddell said, had heard reports that the Fenian Brotherhood in America had convened secretly in Philadelphia and vowed to try another raid after the one at the Canadian border at Niagara the previous year failed. Admiral Hastings wanted all the Royal Navy ships docked at Esquimalt harbor, but especially the *Zealous* (as the Pacific flagship), to be on the alert.

When the men were dismissed, one name was ordered to stay behind.

“Sub-Lieutenant Dickens!”

Sydney Dickens, surprised at the call, was informed by the captain's steward that he was to dine with the captain that evening. Descending to his berth with this unexpected invitation on his mind, the sailor passed another sub-lieutenant, a rather gigantic gunnery-mate from Scotland who was called Elephant.

Elephant was known for being a blustering sort and a bully, but he greeted Dickens warmly enough and moved on without harassment. Though both twenty, Elephant could hardly find a way for his stubble to cooperate with the navy's two rules on shaving—that sailors were to be shaved on Thursdays and Sundays and that no sailor was to have a beard or mustache—while Sydney's visits to the ship barber for his shave were a humbling formality. Sub-Lieutenant Dickens, in comical contrast to the other man, was only a twig or two above five feet, though since his promotion to a junior officer he

seemed to carry himself with a new dignity. He was accommodating to all the other sailors at all times, to the degree that it could be called a true flaw of character were he in any other line of business. His demeanor was so remarkable that everyone, even the bullies and roughs aboard, alternately liked and made demands on him.

Even Horatio, the ship's pet squirrel, seemed to fancy Sydney Dickens more than any of the others. The squirrel shared mess with all classes of the ship and so was very round in the belly and, making for a strange appearance, had caught his tail in the tiller at one point so that he only had half of it left.

As he had a late watch, Sydney decided to try for sleep, though there was enough in this thoughts to prevent it: not just the invitation from Liddell, but also his latest bills forwarded to him. He shook with fear and uncertainty thinking about them and his knowledge that he could not clear them with the money he had. Horatio had curled next to the officer in his gently rocking hammock. Sydney reached into his sea-chest for his box of beautiful rings and studied them closely. This always calmed him.

It further calmed him to say this to Horatio. “I am Sub-Lieutenant Sydney Dickens of the Royal Navy!” What a fairy tale it would have seemed, if he had been told a year earlier that he would have been able to walk into his father's library at Gadshill after his promotion, garnished with gold on his sleeves, with those words on his lips!

“Capital, capital!” was his father's first response, and it seemed that was the whole degree of his enthusiasm. Later that day, riding in silence in their pony cart around Rochester, Charles Dickens had stopped the cart, pressed Sydney's hand, and said “God bless you, my boy! God bless you!”

When he was just a child, Sydney would sit looking out at the sea when they were on holiday in Broadstairs. His eyes were fixed on the water in a strange, unmoving glare. “Ocean Specter” was the name his father gave him for the habit, but the little boy couldn't say it (“Hoshen Peck!” he'd try gamely), so eventually he was called simply “Little Admiral.” That was not the name his messmates called him, of course. It was around the time his father's novel *Great Expectations* had been published, that his name among the sailors had changed.

“Little Expectations!”

Horatio leaped over Sydney and scampered out. Sydney looked up from his rings.

“There you are. Is it true you're to have the good grog with the captain tonight?” It was a

gunner's-mate, Goodlake.

“Where did you hear it?”

Goodlake waved the point off. “Never mind all that, my dear Little Expectations. It's Ugly Duckling.” Now he changed to a private whisper. “Duckie's gone on shore, and without leave. He has first dog watch—the quartermaster will find out then. He'll get four dozen with the cat-of-nine-tails! You don't think he's deserted for California?”

Sydney considered this and took charge at once. “Poor Duckie. Well, we must help him. Wait for me.” Sub-Lieutenant Dickens, always accommodating to any trouble, particularly to poor Duckie, had a clever idea at once. He requested permission from a superior officer to search for a suspicious person seen when clearing a trail in the woods with a working party. In light of the new warnings about Fenian troops, Sydney explained, he wanted to locate the stranger and ensure it was not one of the Irish agitators.

Heartily approved for his stated mission, Sydney walked up Esquimalt road toward the post office looking for any sign. They had suffered many deserters every time there was news of a new discovery of silver mines in San Francisco or gold in Cariboo. But he knew Duckie would never desert, the navy was his whole life and purpose. As he searched, there was a series of shouts and curses down the road from some passing drivers. Sydney was always a little perplexed when hearing oaths and curses outside the ship. The sailors hurled curses of the ugliest kind quite freely but, unlike landsmen, a sailor even after a single voyage had seen too much to ever blaspheme God.

He found the source of the shouting. There was a man in the telltale blue jacket and white trousers intoxicated and lying in the middle of the road. Sydney dragged him to the side out of the way of passing carriages. Ugly Duckling was the name given to this stringy, awkward sailor who had a face with every feature either protruding too much (his ears, cheeks, chin, tongue) or receding so much as to appear invisible (his eyes, nose, forehead). He had trained his tongue to touch the bottoms of his large ears. Though adopted as a butt of abuse by many on board the *Zealous*, Sydney tried to look after him. The first time the two sailors had met, after the exchange of only a few trivialities, Duckie had said, “You and I are going to be friends.” That had endeared the other man to Sydney forever.

“Duckie, Duckie, can you hear me? It's Little Expectations. Where have you been?” Duckie was covered in dirt and branches from the dense forest all around Victoria island. Sydney managed to move him toward the ship with Duckie stumbling and staggering on his arm. He noticed at several points

Duckie's nose bleeding thickly and tried to stop it with a cotton handkerchief.

“What have you done to yourself?” Sydney asked, sadly reprimanding his oblivious messmate.

Having arranged a signal previously with Goodlake, they timed Duckie's return to the ship and into his hammock in a way to avoid detection. Their system was to tie a hammock-lashing around the port stern-ring, wrap the other end to the inebriated specimen, on whom they also placed a lifebelt in case he fell into the water, and pull him up through the stern port. They would hide him behind the captain's milch cow until they could shuttle him into the berth. Goodlake would make sure Duckie was ready for his watch. By that time, Sydney had to dash to his own hammock and dress to meet the captain.

Before dinner, Commander Liddell offered some of his finer whiskey for his young officer. They spoke of Esquimalt and Victoria Island, which had recently united with another colony, British Columbia, and was expected to do the same within a year or so with the Canadian colonies.

“The leaders of the colony here, Mr. Dickens, do not like that our fleet has been drawing supplies from American vendors, instead of those of Victoria and British Columbia. Politicians, confound 'em all! You understand me.”

“I do, Commander,” said Sydney Dickens, trying hard to. “Politicians...” he echoed doubtfully.

“Agreed entirely! Blasted politicians! There are too many of 'em for such a small scrap of land. If their government could clear these damned forests, they could cultivate more and we'd buy from their farmers instead! Now, I was going to say. Admiral Hastings is being used up about the whole business of procuring American supplies in the local Victoria newspaper. Then the colonists are already warm over the fact that the Fenians could be drawn to our fleet to embarrass the Royal Navy—well, the admiralty needn't add more problems!”

“No, sir. I'd think not.”

“That is why the admiral wanted me to speak to you!” The *admiral* wanted him to? Had Sydney even met the admiral before? After all, the young officer had been just a midshipman until a few months earlier when he was commissioned an officer. Admiral Hastings and his wife lived on a mansion up the hill from the the harbor where the *Zealous* was moored. “You see, Sub-Lieutenant, we need a representative on our side to defend our position by writing an article in the newspaper. The admiral needs to persuade the public of Victoria that we have justice on our side of things. We need to set their minds on fire with our words! Admiral Hastings would like you to write this defense—

anonymously, of course—signed 'Vindicator.' So, how soon do you think you can have it?”

Dickens. That was all the admiral of the Pacific fleet had known about him, a name, a word, and that was enough. He likely didn't even know Sydney's Christian name, just that he was a *Dickens*. And now he was expected to turn out a persuasion piece worthy of Luther. How Sydney's father would have twisted his mouth into an absurd expression of displeasure and flattery at this! But it made Sydney feel ill.

The next night after evening drills, when the rest of his messmates danced and sang on deck to the music of the ship's fiddler, and played leap frog across the deck until they could hardly walk, Sydney sat below with a pen and paper in utter torment. He had started and stopped his “Vindicator” article over and over. The frog-leaping resounded in cannon-like booms into his berth.

In despair, Sub-Lieutenant Sydney examined the complete set of Charles Dickens's novels from his sea chest that his father had the publisher sent him the year before when Sydney was still midshipman on the *Bristol*. It had been with such pride that Sydney received the packet! Now he opened pages arbitrarily as though the mere sight of a particular word chosen by his father in *Nicholas Nickleby* or *Our Mutual Friend* would inspire his own.

“*My daughter,*” he read, “*there are times of moral danger when the hardest virtuous resolution to form is flight, and when the most heroic bravery is flight.*”

At one point, Goodlake interrupted and asked if he would go shooting and fishing the next afternoon. Not Sydney, couldn't think of it, too much writing to do. At another point, Horatio began making horrid noises by Duckie's hammock (where Duckie, still recovering from his expedition on the island, and the realization that he had spent every cent to his name, slept with his mouth wide open and his hands flung over his head). Sydney peeled back the pilot jacket they had put over Duckie to keep him warm. Inspecting him, Sydney found that Duckie's nose was bleeding again—this time it seemed to be a viscous, black fluid. On closer examination after he shook his messmate awake, Sydney found that a leech had crawled up the poor sailor's nose, likely when he was boozily sleeping in the Victoria forest. Using lemon juice, Sydney forced most of the leech out and then clipped it off with scissors.

“Better than a flogging, old Duckie, or to be planked, if they heard what you were doing,” Sydney said as his messmate screamed.

Goodlake, who had entered the berth during the bloodiest surgical moment, fainted and had to be carried to sick bay. Sydney, selfishly, didn't find the violent distractions from his work wholly

unwelcome. His futility composing the article continued into the following day, when he was interrupted again by the receipt of a letter. A steamship had just arrived from England that morning and carried mail for the Pacific fleet.

“Oh, see here,” said the stern and serious lieutenant-at-arms, who was handing him the letter which had mistakenly been put with his mail. “I am taking leave for a month to complete some business in the eastern portion of the United States. I have timed it so that I could meet Charles Dickens while he travels on his reading tour.”

“You are—you know him?” Sydney asked timidly, his heart pounding hard.

“Of course I don't, you numskull! That is why I tell you. How would you like to write a letter of introduction for me? You are a connection to him, I understand?” The lieutenant-at-arms was a true martinet in relation to sailors junior to him, leaving even pleasant talk somehow feeling mechanical. It was known he would use the extra oil the gunner's mate didn't need for the guns in his hair, which always looked bright, glossy and artificial—like a wax statue.

“Yes. I am his youngest son.” In fact, there were two Dickens sons, Harry and Plorn, who were younger than Sydney. Harry was studying at Cambridge and Plorn in Australia. But Sydney always preferred to say he was the youngest. There was a certain sympathy that would set in for the youngest; besides, he was smaller than his brothers.

“Well, how about a letter of introduction then?”

“It would be my delightful pleasure,” Sydney said, smiling, though his mouth felt dry and uneasy as he spoke. “Of course!”

In his hand was a letter from his father written before he had left England for his American reading tour. Sydney's various creditors had begun writing to *him* demanding their money! Not that it was the first time for his father to hear of his debts. If he were anybody else, Sydney's habits could be invisible. But not with the name Dickens. His famous father could be tracked down by anyone.

In the letter, Charles Dickens fumed over the intelligence of Sydney's continued financial extravagance. What would his father say if he met the lieutenant-at-arms? What would he tell him about Sydney that could ruin his career forever?

Sydney immediately began writing to his father once the lieutenant-at-arms had exited.

“I must apply to you, I am sorry to say, and if you won't assist me—I'm ruined. You can't understand how ashamed I am to appeal to you again. You know what American people are, you know

their habits of drinking—*that* has run me into debt. It is with shame and regret I inscribe myself your son. If any promises for future amends can be relied on you have mine most cordially, but for God's sake assist me now, it is a lesson I'm not likely to forget if you do and if you do not I *can* never forget. The result of your refusal you can imagine is not exaggerated—utter ruination.”

Why did these pathetic words of pleading and regret flow so easily, and an article about American and Victorian provisions dried up in his mind instantly like an old well being pumped? Sydney tore up the letter in disgust. It didn't matter. He had written ones just like it before and he knew he would rewrite it in more or less the same language again by the time he went to sleep. But just now he needed to murder the paper and sob and curse the name Dickens.

CHAPTER two

On the H.M.S. Zealous of the Royal Navy, Christmas celebrated and much needed heroics attempted.

EACH CHRISTMAS, all British naval ships stationed in North America and the West Indies cruised to the island of Bermuda. The *Zealous* had a smooth passage on the way and perfect breezes from Victoria to this idyllic British colony. All the so-called “idlers” on the ship, the carpenter and blacksmith and surgeon, rushed to deck to watch the snow-white sails fill up once they were underway. They reached the islands at sunrise, the brass-work on the ship looking like priceless gold as the deep water gleamed orange and red. A pair of dolphins danced around the hull.

Sydney Dickens had been stationed at Bermuda years earlier when serving on the *HMS Orlando*. The return was welcome for him, and did his spirits much good. Besides, he had managed to compose his article on behalf of Admiral Hastings for the *Victoria Colonist* and had proudly delivered it to the paper's editor. Bermuda would be his reward for his extra toils.

“Come on shore with me,” Sydney said to Goodlake and Duckie the day they arrived at the islands. “I shall show you around.”

First they stopped at another man-of-war at anchor to greet them, but found that every member of the gunroom was drunk. One of the more ancient mariners was using a stick to move around the bodies of imaginary dead rats on the floor.

When they had made it to the beaches, Sydney led them to a secluded road. Though Bermuda's people were extremely poor and humble, because England had never exported criminals here, most of the islands were safe to wander.

“Where are you taking us, Little Expectations?” Goodlake asked, removing his cap and fixing his fair hair to one side. “Can't we fish? I need to *feed*.”

“Come, Goodlake. Trust me.”

Duckie, who would follow Sydney to the end of the earth, seconded this obediently.

“Where I want to go,” Goodlake was saying in a complaining voice as they walked, “the only place I want to go...”

“China,” Sydney said.

“China! Well, one day I'll be transferred if there's another war with the Chinamen over our right

to trade, and we'll be sent. Or if I'm ever court-martialed, well, you hear me say it now, first thing I'll do is board an opium trader to Hong Kong.”

Climbing over a dune, they found a small cabin where a colored woman was packing up a heap of supplies and food into a small boat.

“Why, Massa Dicksie, don't I know it!” she cried out. She had a beautiful, shining face and striking eyes. Madame Dinah was a bumboat woman who sold supplies to the ships in dock. Her presence was so radiant that Goodlake and Duckie both looked humbled and embarrassed as she embraced their friend. She gave them tea and toast, the latter pleasing the famished Goodlake greatly.

In the small drawing room of her cabin, all the decorations and ornaments had been retrieved from various wrecked and abandoned ships that had carelessly tested the rocks around in the islands. The walls, meanwhile, were almost completely covered with *carte de visite* photographs of junior officers, including Sydney, whom Dinah had befriended. As they drank tea, Dinah sang to them in haunting tones (“Better than the opera,” Duckie whispered, “coon songs are delightful!”). Dinah, seeing Sydney's uniform, and trained in the signs of the Royal Navy, suddenly looked at him with a melancholy smile.

“But you're moving up, ain't that so, Massa Dicksie, why, you'll be admiral!”

Little Admiral, Sydney thought to himself, thinking of his father walking him along the coast of Broadstairs during the summers. *Hoshen Peck, my born little sailor.*

That was long before Sydney entered a school ship at Portsmouth; and of course before Sydney's mother moved out of Gadshill when he was only ten years old. Before Aunt Georgy tried her best to explain why mama had to go to the crying boy. And certainly before he was old enough to hear the wicked slanders repeated, by boys too big for little Sydney to challenge, that Aunt Georgina, who had raised him, was actually his mother and that is why Catherine Dickens had been sent away.

“Oh, but why look sad about his promotion, Madame Dinah?” Duckie asked.

She gestured to the photographs. “This but a gunroom, my dear!” she exclaimed. All the photographs were of midshipmen and sub-lieutenants; no officers of higher rank.

Sydney understood and laughed. “Well, I'll still come back, were I the admiral of the whole fleet, were I a Lord Commissioner, Madame Dinah. I'd fancy I'd still come back here, I am not one to forget friends—that is, if you'd still sing. Now, what bargains do you have these days for us?”

Within minutes, Sydney had bought a basket with all kinds of native luxuries and unneeded

objects: jars of guava jelly, whale cutlets, boot-laces, a lady's hat, and bananas fried in oil.

“No wonder she always invites you in, Little Expectations!” exclaimed Duckie on their way back to the ship. “The future of Bermuda shall be poor no more!”

A few days into their stay in Bermuda, the ships were given the order for a “chase” to Barbados. The officers of the *Zealous* were determined to show that their ship deserved its place as the flagship of the Pacific and set out into the high winds and by the nighttime were in a squall. Sydney, while taking the man-rope up the bridge ladder, wearing an oil skin over his head because of the harsh wind, thought he could see land through the dark spray. He located the first lieutenant.

“Sir,” Sydney said urgently, “I believe we are driving toward shore.”

“The navigating officer knows better than you do, doesn't he, Dickens?” the lieutenant said without taking the clay pipe from his mouth. Sydney wanted to quarrel—he knew what he had seen. He looked skyward—the navigating officer had fixed their position through the stars with the sextant and chronometer, but the sky was hardly clear enough.

They're going to kill us, Sydney said to himself as he walked back. *They're going to kill every last one of us!* A minute later, Sydney turned around with a renewed determination, but then relented and slouched back away. But the lieutenant was frantically calling out orders. He had seen it for himself now. They were driving violently onto high rocks of a nearby coast. The pipe whistled the unthinkable signal that most of the crew had never heard since school ship's training: *Save ship*. The captain shouted orders to let go both anchors, as sounds of cracking and breaking thundered through the ship.

“Up jib, bear a hand and make all the sail you can! Out all reefs! None of your yahooping, you beggars! If we must die, let us see what we can do first!”

Sydney was thrown aft and would have fallen over the stern and perished if he were any bigger. The captain edged out to sea, just barely clearing the breakers.

When the ship had been restored to its course, the first thing Commander Liddell did was to assemble the men aft for prayers. Sydney in his own mind could hear the words of the childhood prayer papa had made them each memorize: *Make me a good little child and let me never be naughty and tell a lie, which is a mean and shameful thing. Make me kind to my nurses and servants and to all beggars and poor people and let me never be cruel to any dumb creature, for if I am cruel to anything, even a poor little fly, you, who are so good, will never love me.*

Leaking, crippled, nearly rudderless, the *Zealous* arrived at Barbados before any other ship. The whole company cheered the captain. The other vessels, arriving one after the other, were astonished to find how battered the victor had been.

Afterwards, Captain Liddell approached Sydney. “My first lieutenant told me that you had your eyes open, and because of you he realized our mistake in time to save us. Mr. Dickens, we're proud to have you part of the *Zealous* family.”

Sydney, still dazzled by the episode, could hardly find the voice to thank the captain for the words.

“Oh, and the lieutenant-at-arms was quite animated, before he took leave, about the prospect of meeting your father. He clutches your letter of introduction to his heart.”

Sydney smiled weakly, thinking for the first time in a while about the lieutenant-at-arms and what would be said between him and Charles Dickens. Charles Dickens: *A letter from my Sydney? Hoshen Peck! That sponger, that idler in his soul!* And the lieutenant-at-arms: *Ah, it is fitting, then, what we like to call him, sir: Little Expectations! Why, didn't you know that?*

That night, the ship musician led all men on the forecastle in a celebration of the ship's triumph over the rest of the fleet.

*Good news from home, good news for me,
Has come across the dark blue sea,
From friends that I had left in tears,
From friends I have not seen for years.
And since we parted long ago,
My life has been a scene of woe;
But now a joyful hour has come,
For I have got good news from home...*

Sydney listened to the singing and the fiddling. In truth, he was absolutely exhausted. But he did not want to go below yet. Did not want to see his hammock filled—he shuddered at the memory—filled high and swaying with goods from the bumboat mistress. The sailors were dancing the hornpipe and, in his hazy concentration, Sydney realized they were calling for him.

“Little Expectations, come on now! You can do it!”

He stood up, eager to dance as his sisters had taught him, but as he approached he saw the dancing was over and they were calling him to play one of the usual games—his least favorite—“baste the bear.”

“Not me,” Sydney said. “Please, I ought go below...” *That sponger, Little Expectations!*

Before he knew it, he was given the position of the “bear.” In this rough sport, one sailor assigned to be the bear crawled on all fours. A circle of attackers tried to whip the bear with ropes' end. Meanwhile, the bear was assigned his “keeper” (in this case, the sub-lieutenant Elephant) who would have his own lash to beat attackers. If the keeper struck an attacker first, the attacker would take the place of the bear. The players preferred to have a small, agile bear and so often urged on Sydney.

Whap. He was hit on the shoulder. Slap. A hard, stinging blow against his cheek. His neck. His leg. The fiddling continued and the whole company was uproarious with laughter. Sydney could hardly attempt to dodge again when Elephant valiantly struck one of the midshipman and a new bear and keeper assigned.

Sydney, burning through his skin, staggered down below (laughing, smiling, of course, in case anyone watched). *Part of the Zealous family.* As he reached his hammock, Sydney dumped his basket from the bumboat onto the floor, smashing one of the jars of guava jelly before throwing the other one against the beam; kicking and tearing the hat; destroying everything that he could among his day's purchases. Then he gathered up all that he could find that he had bought in the last week (much of which he didn't *recall* buying) and, carrying the valuables up to the deck, flung them into the sea with a primitive shout.

CHAPTER three

The company of the H.M.S. Zealous, back in the Esquimalt bay after full repair of its damages at the docks in Bermuda, 'Little Expectations' reports and receives transforming news.

One morning, Sydney Dickens and Duckie sat in a canoe with the natives fishing for salmon. They were pleased that the Indians taught them how to make hooks out of shells from the beach. On their way back through the virgin forest, Sydney thought he could see a man in a dark jacket, sitting on a branch, looking through a spyglass at the shore.

“Look,” Sydney whispered. “Do you see that?”

Duckie nodded. “What do you fancy he's doing?”

Sydney motioned for Duckie to quietly follow him. Sydney removed the knife from his coat that he had used to scrape the fish. Suddenly, there was a building noise coming toward them: a raw yell like a man being scalped. A midshipman from another warship, the screamer, was flying ferociously toward them and would have trampled them if they did not jump out of the way. Following him were three or four others also scrambling and shouting fearfully as they did. Sydney and Duckie, not knowing what else to do, joined their stampede until they had come to a clear path in the forest and the party stopped to catch their breath.

“What happened?” Sydney asked.

One of the midshipman grabbed Sydney by the collar. “Do you have a gun on you, mate? What's the use of you, then!”

At length it was explained that their group had been playing cricket when a bear came at them. They had taken shelter in a cabin, but realizing they were trapped in there with no weapons, they hurried back into the woods.

“Were one of you sitting on a branch, with a spyglass?” Duckie asked.

“Who's this pretty one?” a midshipman replied, inexplicably insulted by Duckie's question. “What good would a spyglass do when a bear's trying to eat you for breakfast?”

Sydney and Duckie retraced their original path but found no sign of the man in the dark coat. Back on the *Zealous*, Sydney looked for the lieutenant-at-arms. It was the officer who, prior to Christmas, had asked Sydney for a letter of introduction to his father. After the ship had been damaged

during its chase to Barbados, it was towed back to Bermuda where it had been repaired. By the time the *Zealous* returned to port at Esquimalt, the lieutenant-at-arms had come back, too.

He had passed Sydney then without saying a word for several days. Sydney was afraid of the silence and afraid what the officer might say. Finally, he stopped Sydney.

“Oh, Mr. Dickens,” the lieutenant-at-arms said after a brief technical exchange. “I just remembered! Would you believe it, I didn't get an audience with your dear old father after all?”

“No?” Sydney asked.

“My steamer was delayed by a storm at San Francisco, and then the ship floundered and we were stranded in Panama for three more days. Well, needless to say, by the time I was in Philadelphia and Washington, he had finished his readings there.”

“That's a shame!” Sydney would never have confessed, even to Horatio the ship's squirrel, his relief at the lieutenant's misfortune of missing Charles Dickens.

“I know it. Yet I'm grateful for your letter. In fact, I'd like to keep it for myself, as a consolation. It is pretty. After all, it is written by the hand of Charles Dickens's son.”

Now, coming back from their adventure in the woods, Sydney reported what he had seen with Duckie.

“Of course, I thought of the reports of the Fenian. As the man seemed to be looking over the docks, it aroused my suspicion,” Sydney said.

“Yes,” the lieutenant-at-arms nodded. “I see why it would alarm you. Let me consult the captain, Dickens. He may wish to organize a search party of marines with you as the headman.”

“Thank you, sir,” Sydney said, saluting crisply and with an edge of gallant excitement.

That evening, however, a party was organized of marine troops with the lieutenant-at-arms himself as its leader. Sydney didn't even know about it until he overheard a cadet who had seen the marines putting on their night glasses and fighting harnesses with their Colt revolvers and ammunition. In the morning, there was a great excitement at the news that the lieutenant-at-arms had captured two suspected Fenian spies and gave them over to the police at Vancouver.

They had located the two men in a cave on a remote part of the coast late at night. Having to wade through a rough surf to reach the shore, the marines found their pouches and cartridges too wet to fire. The marines all wore night glasses, specially designed opera glasses that concentrated light with magnifiers allowing clearer vision in the dark. Waiting until the spies were believed asleep, two

marines rushed into the caves with swords and ferreted out their adversaries into the hands of the marines waiting on the other side.

“Can you believe that?” Duckie exclaimed to Sydney as they ate salt pork and pea soup at mess. “Do you fancy it was the same man they took as the knave we saw in the woods! Oh, I’m so famished, and no more plum pudding! Do you know what the next mess has?”

“Have the rest of my soup,” Sydney offered, his appetite dwindling.

The next morning, Sydney was at the mizzen topsail, trying to retrieve Horatio, who had gotten into the sail and was gnawing at it, when the crew was piped to “lay aft for punishment.” The marines, naval troops specially trained for fighting duty, formed a square. All the rest of the crew took positions where they could best see the proceedings. Sydney, coming over from the mainsail, nearly pushed headlong into the marines when he saw.

“Umph,” Duckie cried out. He was being flogged with a cat-o-nine tails—nine pieces of hard wire lashed to a handle—by a round-faced boatswain's mate. The doctor stood by in case treatment was needed.

“Say, my dear Ugly Duckling,” one of the marines chaffed him, “touch your ear with that tongue, won't you!”

“Certainly,” Duckie said chokingly, and obliged with the trick.

“Don't get caught stealing in Benin, Ugly!” cried a blue-jacket.

“Why not?” Duckie asked with an air of genuine wonder.

“They nail their prisoners to trees by the ears and, well, Ugly, those ears of yours!”

While the punishment went on interminably, the sailors chatted with each other and traded yarns about a time they had been given four dozen of the cat. Sydney asked the cooper what had happened.

“Stole some of the officers' biscuits, that boy did!”

When it was over, Sydney dried the blood from Duckie's back with some flannel. He put the thick pilot jacket over him in Duckie's hammock and told him to rest. But Duckie was already falling asleep.

“Oh, it's all right, Little,” he said dreamily. “I was simply famished, and the vision of all those biscuits in the wardroom...”

“Just lay quietly, dear Duckie.”

Sydney stuck a fork into the beam over the birth. The signal was usually used so that none of

the “lambies,” the young Jacks, would disturb superior officers drinking, but Sydney didn't want anyone to bother Duckie while he rested.

Days passed. All junior officers could go to a fancy ball that was being held at the governor's mansion on the island but no prodding by Duckie or Goodlake could make Sydney go. Another batch of letters had been delivered to the ship and Sydney had received one from his father that depressed his spirits even without opening it. Sydney ran his finger across the envelope, with its proud monogram of C. D., for hours. He imagined Charles Dickens himself staring at the monogram, only with a wide grin, a hungry smile knowing how much that C. D. stood for and accomplished that other men could not.

The letter was worse than Sydney expected. His father sharply bemoaned Sydney's betrayal of trust in lying about how much debt he carried. Even after the last round of bills had been paid by Dickens, and Sydney had promised never to do it again, more bills came in to Gadshill. Sydney had besmirched the family name that he had never been good enough to wear. All of this was a crushing blow in Sydney's breast. Then there was something new, something that his father had never written before: next time Sydney was in England, Sydney would not be welcome at Gadshill.

Not welcome.

Sydney could not put the letter down; he could not stop reading it, though it was quite brief; he could not throw it away or tear it up. He could only hold it at arm's length helplessly as he lay awake in his hammock. Late that night, after the other men had returned, Sydney felt himself on the verge of tears when he heard sobbing sounds. It was Duckie.

“Why, Duckie, what's wrong?”

“Oh, she's lovely, Sydney! She's dreadful lovely, and I am ugly!”

Duckie told his messmate how he had been at the ball and, as he was too afraid to dance with any of the women, Duckie wandered outside at the edge of the woods. There he met a young Indian girl, who took pity on his lonely appearance and taught him some Indian games that he only half-understood, and held hands, before some of the sailors came out and she ran away.

“If I had a face—a handsome face, I mean, that a girl could look at without wincing like they beheld a monster—well, what I would do with that, Little!”

“Now, hold for a moment, dear Duckie,” Sydney said softly. “You are the most genial and gallant man on board this ship, if you are not the most handsome, you are a vision of God still. Now, look at this piece of string—you held hands with her?”

“I shall never forget it!”

“Good. Show me with this piece of string the size of her finger. Yes, is it this? Stay here.”

Sydney returned with his jewel box and, after several comparisons, drew out a beautifully sparkling ring. “This should fit just fine, Duckie, without taking any pains. You give her this, and she will never forget you. Whatever else, she won't forget holding hands.”

Duckie took the ring gingerly in his hands and started to speak but gasped instead.

“Hush, don't even consider trying to thank me, or I'll make you eat the weevils in my hard biscuit, you understand, Duckie? Good, now next time we have shore leave, we'll go into the woods and find her together.”

The next day, Sydney and Goodlake found themselves unexpectedly called to the captain's quarter-deck, taken past an armed sentry that had been placed there since the Fenian attacks at Niagara the previous year. Both junior officers removed their caps; Goodlake spit his quid of tobacco into his cap out of respect. The captain told them to sit.

He informed them that they had both earned a few months leave in England, and that one of the ships in port was leaving in a few days. Goodlake beamed.

“Thank you, sir!” he said.

“I'd like to stay here, sir,” said Sydney.

“What? Wouldn't you like to go home for a while, sub-lieutenant?” asked Commander Liddell, crossing his hands on top of each other inside his sleeves.

“I'd prefer to mess here, sir. And keep an eye on Duckie.”

“Very well, though I have seldom heard such an application to remain here, when one could be in England! And you, Goodlake?”

“Please, I'd like to go home very much, sir,” Goodlake responded.

After Goodlake exited, putting the tobacco back in his mouth and his cap back to his head, Sydney asked permission to address the captain. “Sir, I would like it to be known that myself and one of my messmates were the ones to observe the suspected Fenians in the woods. Respectfully, I believe the lieutenant-at-arms reported the discovery as his own so that he could lead a mission.”

“You have good reason to believe it, for he is a shifty sort,” said the captain. “But he did in fact attribute the findings to you.”

Sydney paused. “Is it the article, then?”

“What?”

“The article I wrote for the *Colonist*. I did not see it in the paper. Was Admiral Hastings displeased with it?”

The captain stopped and looked over the young officer sympathetically. “The admiral decided to write one himself, my boy. Between you and me, he fancies that there is a spark of the poet in him.”

“I see. Then why was I not assigned to lead the party of marines, sir, when I reported the sighting?”

Liddell rose from his chair, trembling a little with age but otherwise projecting a powerful air. “Mr. Dickens, to advance in a career in the navy, one has to be entirely his *own* man. Do you understand?”

Sydney was ready to agree but stopped himself. “I am not sure I do.”

“You don't have to be the bear if you don't want to be the bear, Mr. Dickens,” said the captain. Sydney thought of the horrid game, of being lashed with rope by all the laughing bullies.

Sydney nodded.

“Say, do you act?” the captain asked suddenly. “The admiral is inviting the colony to his house for another ball in a few weeks, and has demanded each vessel to perform a play. As though we haven't anything else to do! Ours is called 'The Steeple Chase, or In the Pigskin.' A farce with a character called Dr. Clipper who needs to make a fortune by winning a steeple chase in order to marry the niece of a wealthy politician. Do you know it? Sit down, I have it.”

Sydney examined the pages of the play and began to laugh.

“Why, you understand the humor more than I do, my boy,” the captain said.

“My family put on amateur theatricals at home every Christmas season when I was a boy,” said Sydney brightly. “Every Twelfth Night, we'd come together—mind you, we are a big family, at least we were then, enough for almost any cast for Shakespeare. I often played the ladies, sir, because I was small, you see. Once we performed a play in a private gallery for Her Majesty the Queen and the Prince Consort.”

“Well then, you are a famous actor! Come, come, give me your arm and let me show you the list we've done so far. If you insist on your strange application to remain on the ship, you will be of great help. I am certain of it.”

CHAPTER four

Two and a half years later, approximately. Charles Dickens is dead in England. Moving the scene to New York, we find the progress of Simon Pennock, tax agent, who has suffered since attempting to extract taxes from Charles Dickens during the novelist's famed visit.

With all that injustice, all that shabbiness by so-called “respectable” persons, he could not have been blamed for giving up every fiber of ambition and yielding to beastly indolence. First, there had been the trickery of those thieving foreigners, that Dickens clique, that had defrauded him out of collecting money he had planned to use to bolster his position in the department. Then, not long afterwards, he had been given walking papers by the chief of the department in Washington. Moreover, his own esteemed brother had been defeated in his reelection for city alderman of Boston, so there was no easy work to be handed there.

What had happened to knock the world into a cocked hat like this for Mr. Simon Pennock?

The former tax collector brooded over the question as he drank a whiskey in an oyster house in a grimy district in the lower entrails of New York City. He had done the same—drink and brood—yesterday and the day before yesterday and would do the same tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. He'd spend immense amounts of concentration kicking oyster shells under his hard bench with the heel of his boot and then across the floor with the toe. What felt especially good was cracking the abandoned peanut shells on the table between his thumb and forefinger.

When he would catch sight of his face in the looking glass on the tavern's wall, Pennock would shiver. His face was longer and drawn than he'd believed; his jaw swollen from a set-to with some tavern brawler two nights before for a reason he couldn't remember anymore; and his front tooth was chipped, likely from the same cause. His beard was overlong and uncombed, too. The bushy hair on his face had blossomed in an odd, ugly patchwork that made him repulsive.

Ugliness seemed perfectly acceptable to Pennock, who in the last two years felt he had aged a decade. His days appeared and disappeared like a man under a spell. Not a day went by that he did not see in his mind's eye an image of a jaunty Charles Dickens holding up his cane like a king's scepter with his hat on top of it and waving it for the crowds bidding him farewell the Liverpool Wharf. The humiliation and agony Pennock felt at seeing this cheat triumph while his own burning failure crept

into his throat had not left the former tax agent since that hour.

Yet, even Dickens's death was no measure of justice. Everyone still loved him and his super-mediocre sentimental books.

Meanwhile, either because he was impressively persistent or very forgetful in his drunken stupor, every couple of days Pennock wrote a letter to the chief of the department of revenue asking (by now, *demanding*) for his place back. It was a new chief appointed by President Grant and Pennock felt if only he could explain his position and the injustices done to him in just the right language, if only he could do that, he could have his life back, he could do his work again, he could stop wasting his days kicking sawdust-covered oyster shells.

One night, maybe at midnight, maybe much later, when stumbling through the puddles along Broadway on his way home, Pennock felt sick and stopped in a back alley, coughing up blood. He looked up, the instinct of embarrassment, and saw the dainty prostitutes, too skinny and pallid for manly tastes, and the assortment of shady people. When he reached his home and his bed, Pennock realized that one of the men he had noticed on the street corner was not altogether unfamiliar.

He thought about it, then forgot, thought about it, then forgot, as he was sweating through periods of sleep and misery in the hot room. In the conscious portion of one of these intervals, Pennock had a vivid memory of the face he had seen from years earlier. It had been one of the opium pushers who operated both here in New York and Boston. Unlike the druggists who dealt in narcotics for their rich customers, the drug pusher operated in the districts and streets on the margins of the civilized classes. Pennock, who had spent time investigating the trade happenings along the wharves in his official capacity as tax collector, had several times interviewed this man and other pushers like him in hotel barrooms or brothels. Pennock would always warn this class of scoundrel about any attempts to defy taxation; he would always walk out of the hotel with fattened pockets and a closed mouth.

That was it! That was what he had to do!

Pennock rose the next morning. He knew finally how it was he would reclaim his departed life.

That morning, Pennock walked down the avenue feeling twenty feet tall, planning a plan, crossing Broadway, the busy New York artery teeming with every sort of vehicle and horse and—only New Yorkers!—squadrons of pedestrians even more insistent than the vehicles on going their own way. He went on his way to the monumental structure of Lord & Taylor's dry shop to buy a new suit.

CHAPTER five

Simon Pennock on his redemptive quest.

In Washington, Simon Pennock checked his watch in the reception-room of his former place of employment, the Federal Department of Revenue. He had a mixture of joy and anger to be in these halls again. The anger had steadily won out as his interview was delayed, but finally, he was seated in the office of Grant's new chief.

“You see, sir,” Pennock explained, “I have information that I believe would be valuable to your department.” Pennock, as the words came out, realized he could not remember the last time he had to be polite and proper.

“Mr. Pennock, it's my understanding that you were dismissed from our department for, among other offenses,” Chief Snipes now shuffled through some papers.

“Sir, I warrant that this is important! Here. Look!” Pennock passed a piece of paper on which was written a list in his hand across the desk.

“What is it?”

“You see before you the names of ships personally known to me that are that have brought shipments of opium, silk and other fine goods into our ports without paying any duties on them.”

The chief adjusted his glasses and studied the list. “How do you know this, Pennock?”

Pennock had not considered how to answer that. *Because their agents bribed me when I had a badge to brandish about and bully them with.* “Mr. Snipes, I think it suffices to say I still can be a valuable addition to this office.”

The department chief leaned into his chair and seemed to consider it. He spoke in a tone that was kind but unforgiving. “According to the files, you were dismissed, for one thing, because of reckless and obsessive behavior shown during an important visit by Charles Dickens in the midst of the impeachment chaos.”

“The officials here at the time did not understand what I was trying to accomplish,” Pennock replied before the chief had finished his sentence. “How it seems in Washington, is not how it is in the field.”

“Mr. Pennock. I know how it is in the field—was there myself for twelve years in California

before coming to this office. Do you know who President Grant's favorite writer is? Charles Dickens. Now, I doubt very much, with your known history, that the president would approve of a new commission for you. I am very sorry.”

“To hell with Grant, to hell with you, Snipes, to hell with Dickens! I'll lick every last bureaucrat here!” Pennock stood and tore up the paper with the names of the smuggling ships on it into small bits and tossed them at the official. “I ain't got a square deal here!”

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The chief thought the former collector looked to be almost in tears when he left the office. Snipes was not completely devoid of sympathy for him. The whites of his eyes and his breath were heavy with drink, and no doubt his habits had shattered him like glass. But even if Snipes wanted to hire him back, the Treasury Department had dismissed dozens of employees over the last year and a half due to a shortage of funds arising from the problems that had set in over the value of gold. In fact, in this environment, Snipes himself was not very confident of his own position he held at the department.

Snipes thought about what Pennock had said: about the boats. If there really were significant revenue to collect on those docks, it would be a laurel for Snipes. Before he left the office that evening, Snipes crawled around the floor like a baby collecting the scraps of paper ripped up by Pennock. He could only piece back together two names of ships, but he also remembered one or two others from his first glance at the sheet when Pennock had handed it over. He decided he would send the names over to customs in the appropriate cities—who knows what they might turn up? And what sort of shiny nimbus that would paint over Chief Snipes's waiting head when it came time for promotion.

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The customs office in Washington sent Mr. Snipes's intelligence to their departments in Boston, New York, Philadelphia. The customs office in Boston thought the information rather interesting, and noted that the most notorious culprit, according to Mr. Snipes's list, was of British origin. They telegraphed to London requesting counsel. The officials in London cared nothing about American duties (considering the lingering lack of copyright afforded to the English by the American congress), but did desperately

wish to punish those who smuggled goods out of Bengal and Calcutta, and would happily hinder the culprits. They referred the information to the parliament and cabled their naval stations—if the ships could be caught red-handed, the officials in England would like very much to stop them. The private opium clippers and schooners were fast, but nobody in the government wanted to believe they could outrun their own captains.

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Once he was back in New York, Simon Pennock had already reclaimed his routine in full. Damn that Chief Snipes down to hell! Here Pennock had handed intelligence about illicit opium smugglers on a silver platter, and the bureaucrat threw him out!

And here was Pennock, back to the grog shops again; sawdust, oysters and peanut shells again; unshaven and unkempt again; obsessing over the political news in the papers; agony and nightmares again.

Frauds! That's what Pennock thought of the bureaucrats in Washington. Just like Dickens, a flat fraud of a man, who would have been thrown in the Tombs with his oaf of a manager, Dolby, if Pennock had had his way. They said the novelist had come here to show his affection for America, really he had come for financial gain—and then because of old grudges refused to give any of it up to rightful taxation!

Pennock wished he could find vengeance.

Vengeance on Dickens (even though dead), on Snipes, on President Grant, on the incompetent agents in their seal-skin caps that used to work for him who had spoiled his plans.

Then it occurred to him. The opium. Forget the petty bribes from the little opium dealers he'd receive when he was a tax collector. It was the smugglers running the ships and unloading the chests who had the real money. They were trading without paying duties and taxes—he needn't be an official of the government to threaten their exposure! It would be easy for them to simply pay rather than invite attention.

Why hadn't he thought of this before?

The scheme was simple, easy, at hand. Taking the cars to the steamship companies, Pennock researched the schedules of the ships he had witnessed smuggling opium into the New York or Boston

ports in past years. Some were now in dry docks; some had sunk. As for the others, Pennock would find a way to meet them and, Lord above, they would soon know his name and bow to him.

The next morning, Pennock boarded the New York & New Haven line of railroad at Fourth Avenue, clutching his ticket. As he walked through the car, he brushed shoulders with another new arrival onto the train. This man, with a wrinkled face and plaster over one eye, locked eyes with him for a moment. There was an instant dislike as there is between determined men who know nothing of each other except for the fate of their pairing in the same place. Each averting their eyes, they continued on their way to their separate train compartments for the eight hour journey to Boston.

CHAPTER six

The Boston harbor. A ship in port waits.

Captain Bernard of the steamer *Samaria* knew something was wrong. He had been instructed to wait a short period for Wakefield and Herman to return after dealing with Osgood. The captain paced the waterside, watch squeezed in hand to the point of the face cracking. No, something was not right. He looked up at the leaden sky above the Boston waterfront.

Osgood. How did he keep coming back like a bad shilling!

How Osgood, the pale bookman, could have been responsible for so much upheaval, the captain could not grasp. Osgood, a publisher, little more than a printer of ink and type, turning out to be such a thorn in the flesh?

What could have gone wrong? Wakefield and Herman could take care of themselves, if necessary, could find him way out of any scrape. Especially against a nothing like Osgood.

“I want the ship to push off immediately,” the captain ordered.

“Mr. Bernard?” his first mate asked. “We are not scheduled—we have passengers expecting to board in the morning. And we're waiting for our mail shipment to bring back. Some of the crew are on shore and have not yet returned...”

“Now!” Bernard commanded. “I will send a message back with the next Boston-bound ship with their instructions.”

Soon, orders given to the reduced crew, the captain had the *Samaria* cruising away from the harbor. The captain had only retired below for a few minutes when he was alerted to a commotion back on deck. Returning up top, he discovered that a small tug was steaming toward them. A few more moments, the tug had pulled alongside.

“What should we do?” asked the first mate. “It looks like it's just one man.”

The captain looked over the situation, wishing his employer were there to give orders. “I want to know the man's business. Bring him up.”

Lowering a ladder, the occupant of the tug was brought over the side. Simon Pennock, he identified himself to the captain. A tax agent. “I have some important matters to discuss.”

“We are rather in a hurry,” the captain said nervously.

“Indeed, you must be in a hurry, sir,” Pennock replied with an arrogant air. “I would note you were marked to leave tomorrow. Most unusual. I've been watching you in dock. This is a ghost ship, isn't it,” he added, looking around at the small band of sailors. “How many passengers do you presently have? Crew?”

“I shall have to ask you to return to your tug so we may resume our course,” the captain said insistently.

“Oh? Then nobody here would like to discuss *opium* shipments, I presume.”

All eyes of the crew turned sheepishly to the captain. Behind him there appeared one of his Chinese *schroffs* and another man who looked more brawler than steward. With hardly a twitch on the captain's part, the *schroff* produced a long knife and the rogue removed a pistol.

Pennock blanched and took a step backward toward the rail. “Now, see here, what's this? You are merchants, not pirates!”

“My friend,” said the captain, moving closer, followed by his two shadows, “this is what so many of you Americans seem to fail to understand. It is entirely possible in life to be merchant, smuggler and pirate all at once.”

“Now see here! I am a government official!” Pennock cried out.

Another sound had been heard—the sound of oars crashing into the water. The navigation lamps were used to locate another vessel, a small life-boat, coming toward them fast. The captain ordered Pennock to be held in place.

“What's in the moon today?” the captain grumbled under his breath as he peered out over the railings. “Can you see who they are?” He was answered in the negative. “Signal them that we are not in need of any assistance. Hang this!”

The signal lights were used to communicate the message but the coming vessel did not stop. As it continued to approach, the captain grabbed a speaking trumpet.

“This is Captain Bernard of the English steamship *Samaria*. Please identify your purpose.”

The life-boat slowed to a stop in front of the steamer. One of the figures in the vessel stood up and addressed them through their own speaking trumpet. “Drop anchor and wait for your instructions! Everyone on board your ship is to come peaceably and or you will be harmed.”

Pennock looked on in amazement at the perplexing situation.

The captain brought his fist down hard on the railing and turned to his men. “Show them who

will be harmed!”

In a matter of minutes, with a succession of agile adjustments, the *Samaria* quickly showed its power of conversion into a regular frigate—a gun uncovered through a porthole on the starboard side and the crew producing rifles which they pointed down over the railings at the visiting life-boat.

Pennock trembled. The captain showed a slight smile and raised the speaking trumpet again. “You were saying, gentlemen?”

Suddenly, there was the sound of a rocket and the sky above the *Samaria* burst open in a flash of brilliant light. It was a parachute light-ball, its shell falling into the water and the glowing chemical illumination burning as it floated in the air like a miniature sun.

In the stunning new light, in the background could be seen the parent of the small life-boat, a giant ironclad battleship, the English flag high above the mast, its insignia reading *H.M.S. Zealous*. Shining black guns up and down the port side pointed at the *Samaria*.

In the life-boat, the front man stood up again with his speaking trumpet, illumined by the descending explosion of light like the chief actor in a dramatic play. “This is Sub-Lieutenant Sydney Dickens of Her Majesty's Pacific flagship, *Zealous*,” the small officer announced evenly and firmly, “and we have received orders to prevent any further movement on the part of the steamer *Samaria*. You are to surrender your ship for search and all individuals to come with us.” Sub-Lieutenant Dickens proceeded to order his marines to board the passenger steamer.

As the name *Dickens* was pronounced, both Captain Bernard and Simon Pennock here united in appearing uncannily flabbergasted. Nor was that name enunciated casually by the naval officer, but with boldness and thunder as though it were as powerful and upright as the man-of-war beyond. The captain, having turned bright red under the glow of the astonishing light, turned to their port side and could see a second Royal Navy warship approach from the horizon. The *Samaria* crew gradually laid down their rifles.

Pennock was spinning around in an utterly disoriented state. He sputtered, “did he just say—did that lieutenant say *Dickens*—?”