

Sample chapter - CHAPTER ONE

## THIRD CLASS CONVICT by MIKE O'DONNELL



1848, the year of revolution in Europe.

In Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and Milan the people demand an end to inequality and take to the barricades.

The Chartist gather in London demanding a fairer franchise, an end to corruption and privilege.

WYATT FAULKNER attends the meeting on Kennington Common and the axis of his life shifts. The planned uprising on 14 June 1848 takes him to places he would rather not have gone.

But Life is not lived standing on the sidelines. He learns this the hard way as a [THIRD CLASS CONVICT](#) on the Hulks.

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Wyatt Faulkner's back would never have carried the scars from the cat o'nine tails if his employer Dr Princke hadn't died on that particular Friday.

The doctor was buried the Monday after, and as a result, twenty-four year-old Wyatt's path led him to the nearby Old Bailey, Newgate Gaol, and the Hulks, instead of echoing the doctor's footsteps along the academic cobbles before being carried into St Botolph's churchyard at the end of a dusty, bookish life.

Monday 10 April 1848 featured more significantly in Wyatt Faulkner's life than for the majority of the twenty-five thousand Chartists who gathered on Kennington Common for the meeting. Their cause began fading from that moment on, Wyatt's troubles were set to begin.

He had seen a poster announcing the gathering pinned to a fence outside John Saville's boatyard in Rotherhithe the week before, and barely given it a passing glance. Even on the advertised Monday, when he turned away from the three grey heads looking down at the freshly planted coffin in St Botolph's, he had no thoughts of Chartists. In truth, he was entertaining the uncharitable idea that it was hardly worth his three fellow mourners shuffling far from the ground they would shortly be returning to.

As Wyatt took the narrow alley westwards after the ceremony, he pondered on the life that had just ended. Dr Princke had spent almost every day, cradle to grave, in the grounds of some educational institute or other. Princke's father, an Oxford professor, had lived in the grace-and-favour house in the college grounds where Andrew Princke was conceived. From embryo onward the doctor had never ventured far from gown and chalkboard. Over the decades, Dr Princke instructed hordes of young minds, but Wyatt was the only old pupil to attend the pedagogue's interment. Four men to witness the burial did not seem much of a reward for a lifetime dedicated to the teaching profession.

Wyatt joined his tutor's household because his father dreamed of a better future for him. Master Shipwright Adam Faulkner realised that iron hulls and the development of steam would mean that Wyatt was unlikely to inherit an expanding business. Building wooden sailing boats on the Thames was a declining trade. Adam went into partnership with John Saville and closed his own yard. The resulting money sufficed to send Wyatt to school. At twenty he obtained a post as Dr Princke's

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general assistant. In addition to the meagre pay, the doctor promised to cultivate the youth and expand his horizons.

“Every aspect of life is here in these books, Wyatt.” Dr Princke explained, tugging ineffectually at a large tan volume on one of the shelves, until Wyatt lifted it down for him. “You may never visit the islands of Japan, for instance, but here you can understand how the people on Kyushu live. You can travel the world and not leave this room.”

Dr Princke had not left the house more than half a dozen times once Wyatt, some four years wiser, became private secretary, cataloguer, and companion. The doctor's health was failing but he continued passing on his knowledge, instructing Wyatt in the ways of the gentleman, a position into which Wyatt had not been born.

“It is possible in these modern times to raise yourself above your beginnings. You have the attributes of sensitivity, application and intelligence that mark you out from your peers. Your father may have been a successful boat-builder, but you have qualities that can take you further. You may climb the social ladder, if you will.”

Wyatt had not been sure that he could ever measure up to his father's finer qualities. Honesty, hard-work and kindness had governed Adam Faulkner's life until he died in an accident during Wyatt's third year. He had been a fine example to his son. Now the other major influence on Wyatt's life, Dr Princke, too was dead.

As he strode away from St Botolph's after laying the good doctor to rest, Wyatt considered the difference between Princke's funeral and his father's. The three old men and Wyatt could not carry the teacher's coffin from lych-gate to the graveside without the undertaker's men helping, and there were no relatives for the mourners to commiserate with. His father's burial had been attended by a big crowd. All the men from the boatyard of course, but none had been compelled to come, and dozens came who had retired years before. He remembered the day so clearly. Kind words had been offered to Wyatt as he shook gnarled and work-hardened hands after the prayer book proceedings were over.

“Made many a fine craft did your dad. You'll look over the river in years to come and see his work still.”

“Allus paid fair for a fair day's work.”

“Had a fine eye for a boat. Never spoilt one for want of a ha'porth of tar.”

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“Kept our Harold on as a watchman even after he lost his arm from that horse. Not many would ha' done that.”

They had all gathered back at the boatyard. Amy and her father John Saville, now the sole owner, had arranged a barrel of ale, trestle tables of food, and small drinks for the women. Wyatt's hand was shaken yet again, and many dark shawled women he barely recognised, came and kissed his cheek and offered commiseration.

“He'll be much missed, lad,” John Saville said as he handed Wyatt a glass of rum. “You had second thoughts about coming back to the yard now?”

“I'll still do the accounting and correspondence, John, but I'll not take on the building work.” He smiled and looked at his hands. “Too soft for real work. Been at the books too long.”

Saville nodded. “Your dad always wanted you to get an education, a chance of something better for you.”

“Don't see what could be better than building honest boats.” Amy Saville took her father's arm. Her usually wild black hair was gathered tightly under the black bonnet she wore for the funeral. It gave her a severe look, like a uncompromising Jesuit.

“Now lass, leave the lad alone. Not everyone's cut out to be a Noah's ark builder. I'm just grateful you're doing the bookwork, Wyatt. Never could get the hang of it. Without your dad we'd never've made a go of business. I can build a thirty foot cutter, but don't ask me to add up a column of figures or estimate costs.”

“You even look like a gent now, Yatt” Amy looked him up and down. “Quite the toff. Your Dr Princke introduce you to his tailor as well?”

Wyatt reddened. That was exactly what Dr Princke had done.

“Don't take offence, Wyatt,” he'd said. “But you need to cultivate a little more style in your dress. I'm too advanced in years to instruct you what modern young bloods are wearing, but I know just the man who can help you.”

Aberdare & Cromwell employed several young men who were only too eager to kit Wyatt out in the latest in breeches, waistcoat, jackets, boots and coat.

“Put it on my account,” commanded Princke. “We'll call you my last project, young Wyatt,” he said as he took Wyatt's arm to negotiate the two steps from the tailor's door back on to the street.

“And I think you *will* be my last project.” He held on to Wyatt's powerful arm as they slowly

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negotiated the stained cobbles and the late winter puddles.

Dr Princke survived only two years longer than Wyatt's father and proved that he had been right: he had started no other projects. He had even thought ahead, as Wyatt was to discover.

So now, as funeral-attired Wyatt made his way towards Fleet Street, he felt grateful to the good doctor for the quality of the clothes he was wearing. And the old man had hinted that the will, which was to be read the following week, would hold a small bequest for his young companion.

Wyatt had thought to walk back across the river and do homage to Dr Princke's memory by leisurely contemplating a future that would make the most of his tutor's instruction. He was not expecting the mass of men that came into sight as he turned down Fleet Lane. Thousands moved down Farringdon Street towards the river. Chartist banners fluttered everywhere, and a profusion of red, green and white flags and favours brightened the predominantly dark clothes of the shuffling demonstrators. Wyatt recalled the poster proclaiming the Kennington Common meeting. Many of the shops along the way were closed but the crowd was well-behaved. Loud cheers and shouts of support came from the packed upper windows of the houses.

Wyatt's spirits were lifted by the cheerful mass of men. The banners petitioned for 'Universal Suffrage' or 'Vote by ballot', and other Chartist demands, and Wyatt could see a pair of horse-drawn wagons at the head of the procession, gay with bunting. Over the years he had learnt of the Chartists, and thought their claims justified, but had never bothered about it any more than he bothered about the Magna Carta. Dr Princke had considered life from an intellectual and sheltered perspective, he rarely saw problems in human terms. His approach had rubbed off, so Wyatt stood amazed at how many active supporters were marching for a political theory.

"Dangerous business," Dr Princke had remarked at the rioting in Paris that had broken out in February. He had been too ill to read about the revolutions disturbing the streets in Vienna, Berlin and Milan a few weeks later, and Wyatt had only glanced cursorily over the reports in the papers. Things like that did not happen in Great Britain: such foreign ideas of rushing to city barricades were always suspicious. He couldn't imagine British men in this happy throng going on the rampage.

The crowd was so well behaved and cheery that Wyatt decided to tag along since they were going south of the river. He could happily follow and turn off towards Bermondsey on the Southwark side. He was surprised to see women among the marchers and smiled to himself at the thought that Amy

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would happily have trudged by their side. She was certainly in favour of most of the Chartist principles but would have gone further.

“Their definition of universal suffrage is hardly universal,” she'd complained. “What's wrong with letting women vote? I'm better informed than half the men in this yard. You think Tam the painter should have a say in who governs, and not me?”

“I don't think it would make any difference as far as Tam is concerned, Amy. He wouldn't vote for Whigs or Tories. He'd reckon it a waste of time.”

Wyatt smiled to himself as he remembered Amy's fiery response. He couldn't understand why she thought the vote so important. Nothing the common man did would alter the status quo, and he certainly couldn't see how the opinion of uneducated men like Tam could be better for the country. Palmerston, Peel or Lord Russell had the good of working women and children in mind, didn't they? The Ten Hour bill showed that the government were against exploitation.

When he'd said that to Amy she had given a great snort, flung her hands in the air, spun on her heel and stamped off. Wyatt had the feeling that she flung the word 'Fool!' over her shoulder but a clatter of anchor chains on the dock had masked any words, so he was probably mistaken. One thing you could say about Amy, she wasn't like any other girl Wyatt knew.

He followed the press of Chartists as they crossed Blackfriars bridge. The bright sun made it seem like a public holiday and most of the working men were in shirt sleeves. Wyatt began to feel warm in his mourning suit and wondered whether near-participation in an event with a festive air was quite respectful so close to Dr Princke's funeral.

On the other bank of the river, on either side of the road, were rows of Metropolitan police. Further on, a small group of impassive mounted soldiers were lined up, but although there were one or two cat-calls as the marchers passed, everything remained peaceful and good-hearted. The chestnut horses flicked their manes and stamped their feet as if wanting to join the marchers. Wyatt decided to follow on with the mass to the common, and see what transpired.

At eleven thirty he found himself at the rear of the crowd just off the Kennington road. In the middle of the common one of the gaily festooned carriages was drawn up, and the second wagon had rattled to the southern end of the open space. Other Chartist groups had already gathered from starting points in the city and Wyatt could see ornate trades' banners and a big green flag with the Irish harp emblazoned on it. He had never seen so many people.

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He crossed to the Oval side of the Kennington road where outliers to the throng idled, and came upon a group of street urchins. Most were twelve or under and raggedly dressed. The streets of the city were never short of local youth, but these were not playing or merely loafing. They were clearly out to make the most of this opportunity to pick pockets, although judging from the clothes of the majority of the marchers, their pickings would be slim. One of the grubby youths stood on a low wall keeping a lookout for a prowling constable, and he eyed Wyatt insolently. Wyatt's dark hair was short and he was athletically built but the boy obviously knew that he wasn't one of the new plain clothes peelers, and he wore no white armband of a 'special', so the lad continued his scrutiny for more threatening passers-by.

Wyatt paused by a low railing and saw a well-dressed man clamber onto the seat of the rally organisers' wagon in the middle of the common. He addressed the crowd, but Wyatt was too distant and the words were carried away on the faint breeze. He turned his attention back to the activities of the young thieves.

"Buzzers and thumble-screwers," a shabby skeleton of a man said at Wyatt's side.

At first Wyatt thought he was an Irish navvy because he clearly wasn't speaking English. His puzzled look drew an explanation.

"Buzzers pick a man's pocket as neat as you like, the others haven't the skill but can lift your watch and chain and be away before you feel the tug." The man's accent was Lancashire.

"Aah." Wyatt nodded in understanding.

"They won't get much here outside a thump round the ear, though." The man drew fiercely on the thinnest cigarette Wyatt had ever seen. Its length diminished by a third.

He was suddenly suspicious. The skinny man obviously knew the cant words for pickpockets, maybe he belonged to the fraternity. Wyatt moved sideways an inch although he had nothing in his jacket pocket. "You seem to be well-versed in the subject."

The man expelled a fragrant jet of smoke. "Well, friend, you could say I learnt it all at college. I got sent to Durham for five years after the Plug Plot. Not that I'm complaining, a couple of pals have that and more still to do in Austraylee."

"Oh, you're a Chartist?"

It was the thin man's turn to look puzzled before he drew once more on his toothpick-sized cigarette. "Why else would we be here?" He seemed to suddenly notice that Wyatt's Aberdare &

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Cromwell clothes were cleaner and of better cut than anyone else's within sight.

"I'm very interested in the movement's aims, certainly." Wyatt felt the need to explain. "I think they...you that is, have the right of it."

The man's cigarette expired with the last long suck and he dropped a butt the size of a fingernail paring and moved away with a contemptuous survey of Wyatt's funeral attire. "Aye, thinking will get the job done for sure."

Wyatt had a feeling of déjà vu and would not have been surprised if the man had called, 'Fool!' over his shoulder. He watched as the ex-convict eased his thin frame through the outskirts of the crowd, heading towards the speaker's cart. Five years hard labour in Durham gaol was a high price to pay for whatever part he'd had in the industrial dispute of the Plug Plot half a dozen years ago. His bony body looked incapable of five minutes gentle labour.

Wyatt thought about getting closer and listening to the speeches, he knew the leader Feargus O'Connor was advertised as one of the main speakers, but the thin man had made him feel unworthy; like creeping into Vauxhall Gardens to participate in the attractions without paying.

Wyatt slowly moved round the outskirts of the huge crowd pausing occasionally to fan his hot face with his hat. The sun was warm for early April and he spotted a public house further along the road. As he weaved his way through the fringes he caught snatches of some of the speaker's words concerning, 'liberty', and 'the rights of the people' and 'the petition'. He recognised the figure of Feargus O'Connor coming forward on the front of the cart and as Wyatt reached the scarred wooden door of the inn, there were less cheers and more shouting. He wondered if the orderly gathering was going to turn nasty.

The interior of the inn was dark after the bright sun, and he took his mug of ale and sat in one of the high booths close to the window. He was thirsty and drained half of the beer in several long swallows. It was cold and pleasantly hoppy. He felt a great deal better and leant back into the corner of the wooden bench. It was several seconds before he realised he recognised the voice coming from the next booth.

"It's orl very well sayin' stir 'em up a bit, but wot if people gets hurt?"

The deep timbre and East End accent were unmistakeable. Wyatt knew it was Bill Dobson. Dobson worked for a timber merchant near the water at Shadwell which was across the Pool from Bull Head Dock where Wyatt's father and John Saville had established their boat builders. Bill

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Dobson was a big man with almost no hair, but unlike biblical Sampson, the loss of hair entailed no loss of his great strength. He could lift planks of timber usually needing two willing pairs of hands.

“Nobody'll get hurt beyond a bit of roughing up,” a second, less accented voice said. “The police will be quick enough to move in. And that's what we want.”

“Wot you on abaat. If the peelers come in bashing, then everyone'll bash back. Stands to reason. Look wot 'appened in Newport: twenty dead.”

“Jesus! That was ten years back. And planned. You need to stir it up a bit. Get people moving. All this talking isn't getting anything done is it? Well, is it?”

There was silence as if everyone accepted that talking didn't bring necessary action. Wyatt finished off the remainder of his drink and wondered whether he should make himself known to Bill Dobson. It sounded as if they wanted to disrupt the Chartist demonstration for some reason. Wyatt would have considered it none of his business and slipped away now that his thirst was quenched, but the memory of the rail-thin man with his equally thin cigarette doing five years hard for a principal, bothered him. And it was decided.

He paused at the booth end as if on his way to refill his tankard.

“Bill. Bill Dobson isn't it? Haven't seen you for many a month.”

The big, bald man at the end of the booth was surprised and got to his feet. “Mr Faulkner. Wot yew doin' 'ere?” His deep bass was almost a rumble.

The three others huddled in the booth looked up at Wyatt. Dobson leaned across and engulfed Wyatt's hand in his own as Wyatt put down his empty mug. Wyatt recalled the last time they'd met at the end of the year. Bill had just had a run-in with the police at Sun Tavern fields.

“Hope you're keeping out of trouble, Bill.” Wyatt looked round at the seated men, or he thought all the men were seated. The man at the head of the table by the wall had only been squatting and the reason was obvious when he stood up. He was seven feet tall and built to match, and clearly if he had sat on the bench seat his knees would not have fitted without removing the table. He had a sloping forehead and deep-set eyes and reminded Wyatt of a gorilla he'd once seen at the Walworth zoological gardens.

“We wus just discussin' a bit of bizness, Mr Faulkner,” Dobson offered.

“Yes...I heard.”

“You heard? You heard, what?” A man of about forty sitting next to the gorilla looked up sharply.

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He wore a scrubby moustache and a thick lock of dark hair lay across his forehead. If his partner looked like a gorilla, this man more resembled a stoat, a thought which was strengthened by the rusty red colour of his jacket, and Wyatt wouldn't have liked to have met either one in a dark alley. Wyatt ignored the remark and looked at the man sitting next to Dobson.

“You work at Shadwell, as well, don't you? Seem to remember I've seen you.”

The man nervously jerked his head either in acknowledgement or denial.

“As the man told you, we're discussing business here,” scrubby moustache said with a look that clearly added, *and you're interrupting, so hop it.*

“Then I'll be on my way. Oh, by the by. If you're going outside I'd keep my hands in my pockets. There's a crowd of buzzers and thumble-screwdrivers working the pitch.”

Wyatt turned the end of the booth and paused for a second and was gratified to hear one of the men ask,

“He must be the Law. Is he, Bill?”

“No, but doesn't signify. He heard. If there's bother now, it's at our door.”

Wyatt didn't wait to hear more.

A group of hulking men stood lounging round the bow window of the public house and Wyatt wondered if those inside were merely the leaders. *Why would fellow working men want to create a disturbance?*

Back in the inn, Wyatt's appearance had caused some argument among three of the four men. The gorilla said nothing, but merely resumed his squatting position and waited for instructions.

“He's nobody,” the weasely man said. “They could never prove who had a hand in starting a rumpus.”

“You 'eard what Mr Faulkner said. He knows I'm in bad wiv the Stepney peelers. It'll go 'ard if I'm snaffled agin. It was a warning.”

“Who the hell is he to warn anyone? I thought you all wanted change? It's not going to be handed out on a plate. Look what they did in Paris. That's what's needed.”

“What a load of looting, murdering Frenchies do isn't for us,” the third man said. “I'm wiv Bill. I'll take my lot back. Money won't do us no good if we're all in quod in Millbank. It's orl right for you, but Faulkner knows me and Bill from the yard. Probably knows a couple of the uvvers outside, an' all.”

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Despite his protests, Conrad Sperling was left pulling his sparse moustache when the other two had gone. The look on his face was murderous and Wyatt would have been disturbed to know that Sperling's expression was a reflection of thoughts about him. His sharp eyes had noted the quality of Wyatt's jacket, and the elegant black hat and cane in his hand.

“I should have told you to tear the pampered head off his shoulders, Moss. I hate jumped up interfering puppies like him getting in the way of my plans.”

The gorilla Moss's eyes followed the movement of Sperling's lips but there was no look of understanding on his lumpy face, although the lack of expression belied his intelligence. He had followed all that had passed at the table.

“Damned lily-livered milksops. Half of Europe up in arms and this lot can't even start a little scuffle because some toff recognises them. They'll do no more'n talk revolution all the way to my retirement, and at this rate I'll be no further up the ladder.” Sperling finished the last of his ale. “One thing's for sure, Moss. If we come across that snotty little bastard again, you can put his lights out for good and all.”

The giant's face betrayed no emotion but there was a volley of cracks as he flexed his great knuckles. Neither of them realised that they would shortly meet Wyatt Faulkner again and this time all the advantages would be on their side.