

- --PREFACE – From a Gaol to a Coffee House Seraglio

Late in the evening, June 2nd 1863

Nib on paper, scratching out an exquisite cursive hand, the first words of *The African Leviathan, a novel by Mr Payton Ake.*

‘Bah.’

Alas. He screws the folio up and tosses it into the fire. The problem? It is too quiet in here tonight. Too quiet to read or write. Too quiet to do anything but expect trouble.

Mr Ake runs the busiest bridewell gaol in the entire city. This is on account of the proximity to the docks and Landing Stage, where all manner of seafarers, warehousemen, thieves, prostitutes and racketeers ply their trade in an endless cycle of victims and perpetrators, playing out nightly hard luck stories. The worst offenders are usually corralled into this dense, red brick pen, prior to court, prison, the rope or going back on the streets. Never is there a dearth of customers, day or night.

The Campbell Square Bridewell is a small but impregnable bastion of correction, the vital first staging post of crime and punishment and the aforesaid leviathan of a West African man that runs it values that principle like no other. He has known the fear of death in battle, on the high seas, in thick, corroded iron chains, in the dark alleys between warehouses. He knows where he prefers to be, for the future of his children, if not so much for his own sake. To be on the right side.

Law is protection.

Law is certainty.

Mr Ake is the law.

What else is there to do? Mop the floor? Wash the walls? The sweet aroma of his sandalwood and ether solution clings to everything, sanitising and masking. He only coated

the place minutes ago and it isn't even dry yet. So what else? Write a novel? Tried it. The problem with having too much to say is where to start.

Some evenings, when he gets too much time to think, he doubts all of his high principles and attempts to better himself, this being one of those particular nights. Because it is quiet. Damn it. Damn that quiet. It is a cacophony. It is an echo chamber of madness.

That's good. He should write that down. He picks up his quill.

The iron door reverberates with the clanging groan of the knocker. Is this the devil come to claim him? Has Old Nick stopped time and arranged for this still evening, just so he can feast on Payton Ake's rich, delicious Igbo soul without interruption or distraction? If so, at least it is salvation from this dreadful inertia.

He unbolts the door and pulls it open.

'Captain Frank? This is highly unusual for you to come here...'

A gloved finger is pressed to a trimmed and mustachioed lip. It belongs to a diminutive man in an immaculate cape and top hat ensemble. He is Captain John Frank, Commander and Chief Constable of the Liverpool Watch and Mr Ake is quite correct. He never comes here, or goes anywhere in this city, these days. So then, why tonight? Mr Ake quickly gathers that the empty gaol really is no coincidence. Captain Frank remains on horseback in the shadows of the narrow yard, keeping at eye level with his old, old friend.

'Payton,' he rasps. His eyes are bloodshot, his manner shaken, discombobulated. Something is very wrong. Mr Ake knows this man like no other.

'John? What is the matter?'

'I can count on you. Can I not?'

'Always and forever.'

This relieves just a pinch of his troubled temper. 'That is all I wanted to know.'

'John, what vexes you so?'

‘Awful trouble, Payton. A disturbance to this fair city like we have never seen before. A rift in the ranks, a deep and sudden schism. I must warn you, but I must also count upon you.’

‘John, please tell me what...’

He presses his finger to his lips again, giddies his horse and canters out of the yard before galloping away, hooves thundering. Mr Ake is left with a riddle, as he always is when he meets this man.

‘John?’



Half a mile across town and another world away there is drinking, gaming and cavorting above a coffee house on Castle Street. Discrete, worldly gentlemen clientele call it *The Seraglio*, although there is precious little discretion on display tonight.

The Commander has done this in every port worth its salt, from Savannah, Georgia to New Orleans to Cherbourg and Rotterdam. A life as a senior Naval officer takes you to some places, but this here is the zenith of drinking, gaming and cavorting. This here is hog heaven, this here is Liverpool. Real Ottoman stylings, sweet hashish and opium aromas, exclusively reserved, the finest of gentlemanly pleasures from all over the Empire under one roof. Do they ever serve coffee here?

The cooze, his favourite, whazhername, Nancy that's it, blonde ringlets, porcelain skin, sits on his knee, grinding her purrrfect lil derrière into him. She's probably Irish but he'll disregard that on the grounds that she is so good at what she does. The Mayor himself recommended her to him, offering up nothing but the finest of everything to his guest in the

city. The Commander sups rum, none of that rough Navy swill but a rare and expensive molasses distillation. His fingers go walking upon Fancy Nancy and his hands follow, like he's playing a bass fiddle. She can handle his roughest touches, unlike all the others.

A fulsome win on the tables tonight, though he'd swear that the powers that be make it happen that way, for he never loses in this town. Rather takes the fun out of it. It mirrors all his other business in Liverpool and Great Britain and man does he have some other business, but this slinky trollop reminds him fast that he's done with all that for tonight. She grabs the bottle and swills rum in that pretty little mouth of hers before kissing it back to him, long and deep. She looks like she is actually enjoying the whole act, all sassy 'n' slinky, tireless in her work. This gal really knows what she's doing. She'd give them New Orleans coozes a run for their money.

Click. He hears that tiny sound from across the room, attuned to it from his long years of bushwhacking and river piracy on the old Mississippi, unmistakable and deadly. Nancy yelps as he pulls his Smith & Wesson and shoots instantly into a red curtain at the far end of this long room.

His slug catches the ingrate sniper with a whomp and the would-be assassin falls out from behind the fabric and onto the wooden floor, thudding down stone twitching dead as he strikes the wooden deck, expression of surprise on his mug. Caught him square in the moustache, a neat hole in the front, brains spattered out of the back. Too bad he got killed rather than maimed as, inevitably and immediately, there are questions to be raised about this incident. The Browning pistol remains clutched tight in his hand, an inferior weapon held by an inferior fellow.

Commander Banastre Xavier Dunwoody delicately removes the gasping Nancy from his lap and gets to his feet, groaning and too full of rum to have to deal with this bullshit. He goes over to inspect his failed nemesis closer. Everything and everyone has stopped in this

room, all eyes on either him or the corpse, depending upon which sight takes their fancy in this den of sin and iniquity. Reckon this fella had not one iota who he'd been commissioned to shoot, else he wouldn't have dared set foot in this place. Reckon too he can't talk much now with that slug in his face and his grey matter dripping off the crushed velvet drapes.

'Damn.'

Well, that's a mighty fine evening ruined, then.

Rotten eggs and fish. All about every estate, whether in the gentrified streets of Toxteth where they live in their townhouse on 101 Canning Street or further down the hill to the sprawling, endless docks, the court slums, the sloppy slurry at the riverside. The stink is angry, the stink is relentless. It annexes the nostrils, only escaping down into the pallet to coat the tastebuds with the most horrid of lavatorial tangs. There she is, unrecognisable in a stove pipe hat and dark blue great coat several sizes too large for her distinctive shape. Astride a sturdy filly, cantering down the hill from Canning Street towards the grand but ominous Customs House before passing the United States Consul on Paradise Street. It is not a route they had to take, but they have special reasons to.

Harriet Dunwoody, a glowing, pregnant Southern Belle who has somehow found herself displaced to this maggot hill of a Northern clime, hard sniffs a handkerchief laced with pungent, Parisian cologne to cover the malodourous imposition, but it permeates and overwhelms everything else and, in all those months since their arrival, she still hasn't adjusted. Her condition doesn't help much either, with every sensation that much more febrile, especially pain and smell. Ugh.

Some whiff, about this here Liverpool.

Her nag's hooves clack and scrape the cobbles in a steady rhythm and she considers what must presently be called home, the townhouse back up there on the hill and the man she left in bed, snoring like a spent boar. She has his every movement mapped and logged. Commander Banastre Xavier Dunwoody, her beloved husband and pappy to her baby, won't rise until midday and that is as sure-fire a bet as you'll ever get.

Then he will demand a hearty breakfast and admonish the staff for something non-existent or trivial. Then he will perchance maybe head to what he calls 'The Consulate' on

Rumford Place to begin his day's business of snorting and swearing and cursing the Yankee Yoke and all its hideous insidiousness. Perchance probably definitely maybe certainly drinks to follow with those Denizens of the Cotton Exchange, nouveau riche merchants frothing with rage at the Union for causing a confounded cotton drought in the port and mills of Lancashire. How dare their gains be attacked and withdrawn so. How much her Southern gentleman husband knows their chagrin, milks it, harnesses its angry potential and distils it into his own power; the furnaces of hell. How now Master and Commander Banastre Xavier Dunwoody, friend of the businessman, fervent ally of The Chamber of Commerce. Now there's a *real* American. A gentleman blessed with purview, a messiah of the Mississippi arrived to the Mersey with a chest full of promises. Bravo Banastre, tell us another of your roister doister seafaring tales while we ply you with rum, cigars and tarts. Harriet knows all of it, every tired line and every drunken tryst. It is her business to know, on pain of death.

Conté Marie-Louise Louverture, the one member of staff that she was able to bring with her from the Creole house detail in Baton Rouge, accompanies Harriet on Rosalinda, her favourite steed. Well, 'staff' is a term reserved for those who can only observe the pair at a distance, for they are first among equals and have been for a lifetime. Only the accident of birth dictates what they must show the world in regular circumstances. This morning though, the circumstances are far from regular. They are both clad head to toe in peeler outfits 'borrowed' from the Constabulary laundry, baggy enough to hide their womanhood and identities at a glance from any chattering classes in the street.

They pass directly the official American Consulate, the huge golden eagle above the doors indicating this city's long and intractable links with what is now a troubled land, a place on the edge of doom, fighting for its survival from the likes of Banastre X. Dunwoody. There he is, the bald eagle himself, United States Consul Thomas Haines Dudley, on his hands and knees scrubbing faeces off his patio doors as his long-suffering staff tackle the

obscene graffiti on the whitewash. Banastre pays local gangs to perform this mischief often thrice daily and every morning, noon and night Dudley is there with a bucket of suds, setting a pious example to all. Bless him, but he cannot know about the two figures gliding past him on a particular business of their own. If he represents the fair means of winning the war, Harriet and Conté are the foul. Their commanding officer has seen to that.

Boarding the paddle steamer Cheshire still mounted on their horses, they sail across the Mersey river, taking in all the contrasts of industry, maritime trade, poverty and opulence in one vista, before landing at Woodside Ferry. The Bayou it ain't. Landing up, they traverse the seawall track in the direction of the Cammell Laird shipyard in Birkenhead, the fastest growing part of the city. Just a pair of Watchmen watching, nothing to see here.

And how the other side of the river really, really goddamn reeks, even worse than across the water. Necrotic and sooty, choking and acrid. The coal black death, mined from deep underground and delivered to the lungs via the burners of industry, mingling with the stench of a river that is an open sewer, a fiesta of cholera. Praise be for the Mississippi, how Harriet laments it.

Conté says nothing on the ride, quiet in public places as usual. She is as far from knowing her place as she will ever get, more that she retains her own counsel to stay covered and alert to a long tariff of dangers that follow the pair everywhere they go in this city. A pregnant lady and her maid shouldn't be seen out at all, never mind riding in disguise. Conté has adopted the stiff-backed countenance of a Peeler and she knows how to carry herself just right to evade anything but the closest of inspections. It is an easy role for her.

At the grand, cast-iron gates, they espy the tangle of looming masts belonging to vessels of every variety of size, commission, construction and repair. This is only matched by a ragged cacophony of metal and wood work, created by thousands of yard workers regimented to the beat of foremen and supervisors with their blueprints and their

commissions and their ambitions to dominate the seas with their smoke stacks and paddle wheels, to which there is no ceiling. This place is richer than a goldmine, Harriet has seen the accounts liberated from Banastre's records. Hidden in plain sight, some 53% of the builds carried out here are for the Confederate Navy in direct violation of the British Government policy of neutrality, a fast and loose statute if ever there was one. This city does what it wants, for better or worse, because it has the money, scandalous to say so but more than even London at the current rate of growth. There is not even a token attempt to hide this magnificent maleficence here at Cammell Laird.

Conté grabs her shoulder and reads from her notes. 'The Confederate State Ship *Banshee*, stage name HMS *Serendipity*, natch. 533 tons. 68 pound guns. 5 inch iron plated armour. A 15 foot spiked ram. Damn.'

She jabs a finger at the vessel, but it is impossible to miss it.

'Damn,' mutters Harriet, 'Some ram.'

'That big fucker will rip our fleet to driftwood.'

'Yup.'

Harriet had heard about this, but it hasn't prepared her for the sight. A huge, looming, ironclad, side paddle-steamer, lurking in dry dock just beyond the schooner builds dwarfed by its majesty, awaiting launch amongst a trove of smaller gunboats destined themselves for The War. It is a giant floating buttress and visual proof that the limeys are very much part of it all, as much as The British Government feigns to demur from such accusations.

It is the *CSS Banshee* and Harriet can already hear it screaming.

'You've gone a worrying shade of puce, Harry. Are you quite woozy?'

'I'm fine. Don't start fussing again.'

'Liar. You're having collywobbles. Plain as day.'

'Indigestion.'

Conté cracks her jaw. ‘We don’t have to do this.’

‘We don’t have to do anything. We’re women. Sorry, we’re ladies.’

‘Speak for yourself. I’ll rephrase. You don’t have to do this.’ Harriet shakes her head.

In what world would that statement ever be correct? Her companion is content to persist with her line. ‘I’m gonna keep saying it whether you like it or you don’t, Harry.’



As they get up close to the ironclad beast and stalk the quay, Harriet is mindful of their manager in this enterprise, all of 4500 miles away from this spot. Is it Major General Butler’s fault or is he just restricted by the whims and follies of his own superiors? Do they actually want to win this goddamn War? Conté scribbles notes into her moleskin book and then artfully sketches what she sees. More numbers than words go down on paper and she scratches her head again, baffling herself with logistics.

Harriet stares at her upright, uptight friend, who speaks back at her without taking her eyes off her notes. ‘And I’m gonna *keep* saying it, Harry.’

‘Your mouth will stick fast that way one day. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.’ Harriet knows how to stand her ground with Conté where few would. She’s had nearly a lifetime of practice. ‘This isn’t a one woman job, Conté.’

‘That’s right. It’s a one army job. So if anyone is getting killed, it should be me. There are two of you. At least that sum is simple.’

Harriet strokes her friend’s arm, rebuffing her attempts to protect her from what is coming for the umpteenth time this morning. ‘How much dynamite are we going to require?’

Conté sucks air through her front teeth and wedges the pencil behind her ear, checking her figures again.

‘I’d say a ton. But I’d also say that youse are stark-raving fuckin’ mad. A right pair of wagons so.’

The voice is gravelly, pickled in sarcasm and deep as the bottomless pit. The face is wide, bent, pocked and scarred with a thousand brawls. The eyes are wide and cute, full of Donegal devilment. He almost sings his words rather than speaks them.

‘Then what are you doing here wasting your time with us?’ growls Conté without even looking at him.

Royston Chubb chuckles and prods a meaty thumb in Conté’s direction.

‘Listen to this one. Because I like gold, you cheeky sweat. That makes a man mad too. I heard stories about your Wild West.’

‘Harriet, I don’t trust this common, scabrous turd and I don’t care if he hears it.’

Chubb’s wide mouth gapes like a fish at the brazen insult, voice raising a couple of octaves. ‘Listen to her. She’s a cheeky one above her station isn’t it? Go fetch me somethin’ or other.’

Harriet says, ‘We’re all on the same side, Mr Chubb. Both of you, wind it back.’

Conté continues to seethe and shirk eye contact with Chubb. ‘Butler can go whistle from a thousand leagues away. Setting us up with local criminals. This is not a fit enterprise, Harry. Let me act alone.’

Chubb is missing several of his front teeth and the rest are brown stumps. ‘Harry is it so? That’s a chappy’s name. Ye don’t look too much like a chappy with that babbee belly of yours. I can see it under that big coat of yours. No flies on me. You must be sweating like a geebag.’

‘What?’

Conté finally brings herself to glare at the man, which is hardly an upgrade from ignoring him. ‘We can manage just fine without your help, sir. You’ll still get paid. So off with you, clamber back under your stone.’

Several of the Irishman’s chins wobble as he shakes his head, red and silver tufts of his receding hair dotted around his glistening pate, which he mops with his tweed cap.

‘Fucking maddening hot so it is, for a morning.’

Conté bristles again. ‘Mind your language.’

Chubb hold his hands up. ‘What? Ladies present is it? Ha, right you are, Duchess.’

‘If we can get back to business?’ intercedes Harriet. These two have taken an instant dislike to one another. Like it or not, Chubb is all they have.

His glance darts between the two of them, doing some working out of his own. ‘So who’s the boss of this operation betwixt the two of youse, eh? Mistress Round Belly or The Louisiana Lip?’ He eyes Conté up and down. ‘Genuine, no offence Missy but I’ve never met the likes of you and I’ve met every type in my puff, tall and short. You are a curiosity.’

‘Plenty of offence,’ snorts Conté keen to be out of the man’s company, ‘You’ll find more of me across the river if you care to look. Living with the rats, crawling off the boats half-dead. You Irish cuss and complain about maltreatment then you look down upon us. You have no idea.’

‘What do ye know about rats, girl? Come on now. In your nice house up on the hill. Ye don’t fool old Royston. Cutting me with that snarky gob on yers.’

‘You fucking idiot.’

‘Language.’

Harriet steps between them again, this time having to push them apart. Chubb’s a big man, but she knows all about Conté’s artfulness with a fist and blade. Now is not the time.

‘We just need to know, Mr Chubb. Are we still on?’

Chubb and Conté continue to eyeball each other. 'I know who's boss. Who will always be boss and I did the deal with him, not ye... girls. General Butler must be awful desperate so he must if he's got a plump porcelain chick with child and her indentured flunky to do his bombing. If you ask me.'

Conté emits a sour little smile from the corner of her mouth. 'We didn't. Ask you.'

'Funny. Look, that's no slight, like. It's just the way it is. Animals, vegetables and minerals, birds and bees. God's order of things.' Chubb's jabs a thick thumb out to sea, then at Harriet and lastly at Conté. 'Him before you. And then you before you.'

Conté looks fair ready to knock him into next week. That might appear ridiculous to a stranger, but she's seen her take down bigger, quicker, stronger and younger men than him in an instant. 'What the hell are you talking about?'

'Still, we're all in this together so let's get about the business, eh?'

Chubb spits on his palm and offers it to Conté, who sneers. Harriet intervenes by accepting his handshake. His giant paw closes around her wrist.

'So we're all set, Mister Chubb.'

'Aye. Provided you get me my gold, none of them Yankee dollars. They won't be worth the paper to wipe me arse with if your lot lose the war. I'll have to vanish myself, so this is vanishing money.'

Conté persists in bristling. 'We won't lose the war.'

She's met with a low chuckle from Chubb, as if he's just heard a dirty joke. '*Her* beloved husband and the father of that bun in her oven is cocksure to disagree, chicken. I won't tell though, provided you're both as good as your word.'

Conté draws to Harriet's side, but she doesn't need her protection, from Mr Chubb's words or from his teasing manner. 'Uh huh.'

Harriet follows a more pragmatic line. 'Question. Your Fenian friends won't be happy if you vanish on them, will they?'

Chubb spits. 'I'll be happy. Nelly will be happy. Everyone else can go and shite. I've no loyalty to this city. You've not been here long enough to see why, but hang around and you'll see.'

'I'm sure we will,' answers Harriet. She can feel Conté's hot, needling eyes without even looking at her.

'Midnight tomorrow. It launches the following day so you'll have no other chance. They're already stoking the furnaces for the launch. What with the amount of ammo on board... whoo-whee. It'll make for one fuckin' almighty bang so it will. They'll hear it in fucking Richmond, Virginia.'

Conté unmoves. Harriet nods. 'Acceptable.'

'Nightwatchmen and the boilermen crew are paid off, they think my boys are just thieving some tools and such. Still think ye can do this by yourself, dear?'

Conté casts him a sideways glance. Harriet knows that this is exactly what she is still thinking.

Chubb hacks up some mucous and deposits it on the cobbles. 'Pay me by noon tomorrow and Butler will have his great exhibition. That's provided youse two grand fillies are halfway competent in your bid to stir up so much. No offence.'

He stuffs his hands in his pockets and saunters off, blissfully unaware that he nearly ended up wearing his balls as earrings a moment ago, goading her friend in that manner.

Conté sneers at his back, still mighty irked. 'People who say 'no offence' always mean some offence and that's not even a pinch of the damage that imbecile can cause to us. Butler is as much as an oaf for employing him. Now he has our trust in his hands. What if he sells us out? He's a cheap bastard from head to toe, you can tell that just by looking at him.'

‘Now, now.’

‘Sorry but I’m not sorry.’

‘Butler is our commanding officer. And Chubb's all we've got. We must go with it.’

‘I don't like this, Harry. Any of it. The plan, the place. The people.’

Harriet stuffs a pipe and lights it. ‘You’ve made that plain.’

‘You smoke like Banastre. You know that?’

‘Suppose I do pick up some of his mannerisms.’

‘Be careful with that. He’s a charming man. For a devil.’

‘What is this, an interrogation? Conté, I have to look the part.’

‘But you don’t have to like it.’

‘What’s really vexing you? Spit it out.’

Conté shakes her head. ‘Does Butler actually want us to succeed?’

‘Not this again, Conté.’

‘Yes this again.’

‘We got our orders. Mister Chubb is right unfortunately. Who are we to question?’

‘Which part of you is talking now? The Irish? The Choctaw? The gentle Southern Lady? You play so many roles that you forget who you are.’

‘The part that wants to win this war. Like you, I'd hope.’

Conté sneers. ‘I come from a long line of people who did question. Toussaint Louverture, leader of the Hispañola revolt.’

‘Right. You have not mentioned your hero Granddaddy for at least five minutes. Why don’t you tell me again? I’m sure I’ve forgotten.’

Harriet starts walking towards their horses. Conté stalks her. ‘First ruler of free Haiti. Defeated Napoleon Bonaparte no less. And sarcasm is the lowest form of wit.’

‘Please, tell this to someone else for the first time, Conté. I don’t mean to reduce it, but we need to live in the present. You are the hero now.’

‘Who will listen here apart from you? It bears repeating.’

‘Oh God.’

‘Don’t you patronise me too, Harry. I’ve read more books than you. Who taught you to read? Um?’ Harriet stops in her tracks and looks to the heavens. ‘Don’t.’

‘Look, Conté...’

‘You are in no condition. I said so. Listen to me for once. I won’t see the death of you. You mean too much to me.’

‘And you to I. So...’

‘If that were true, you would let me go alone. I’ll blow that crate alright, I’ve got it figured. Let me do it. For the love of God, let me.’

‘So you can be the great Toussaint? The legend? And who will Butler tell about you? Or me?’

Conté’s face sours. ‘This all stinks. This place, this deal. I believe we’ve entered hell on earth and you do so willingly for a snake of a lawyer from Massachusetts. And you open your legs for that other horror of a man.’

Harriet reigns in her impulse to retort and permits herself to pause, to let her friend simmer down as much to salve her own conscience. It is difficult. What kind of choice do they have in Butler or Banastre? Has there been a moment this morning that she hasn’t considered returning both of them to Canning Street to be the obedient wife and servant, to let that weird Bostonian oaf go hang and just live their lives out peacefully? To welcome Banastre in having his way with her, with Conté, with the world? No, but that is an idle folly that would become a living hell. There would be no peace, ever.

That is fear invading her sensibility, just like the stink around here. Harriet Dunwoody just has to live with both and do it with a steely eye on victory. She knows why they are in Liverpool and so does Conté. Stand firm.

‘We have our orders. Our commanding officer...’

‘Oh, you going to do this now? Pull rank?’

‘There are no ranks between us, Conté. Don't make this awkward.’

Conté nods, fully dialled up from furious to hurt now.

‘Have it your way. No, not your way. His way.’ She mounts and gallops off.

‘Conté, hold up. Wait.’

Harriet is suddenly mindful of anyone in the yards who has been watching this little festival of bickering. Conté Louverture most certainly won't hold up, for man nor beast. Her friend and erstwhile Mistress mounts and gallops after her.